

INTERPRETATION

A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching

First and Second Samuel

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN



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A Bible Commentary

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SERIES PREFACE

This series of commentaries offers an interpretation of the books of the Bible. It is designed to meet the need of students, teachers, ministers, and priests for a contemporary expository commentary. These volumes will not replace the historical critical commentary or homiletical aids to preaching. The purpose of this series is rather to provide a third kind of resource, a commentary which presents the integrated result of historical and theological work with the biblical text.

An interpretation in the full sense of the term involves a text, an interpreter, and someone for whom the interpretation is made. Here, the text is what stands written in the Bible in its full identity as literature from the time of “the prophets and apostles,” the literature which is read to inform, inspire, and guide the life of faith. The interpreters are scholars who seek to create an interpretation which is both faithful to the text and useful to the church. The series is written for those who teach, preach, and study the Bible in the community of faith.

The comment generally takes the form of expository essays. It is planned and written in the light of the needs and questions which arise in the use of the Bible as Holy Scripture. The insights and results of contemporary scholarly research are used for the sake of the exposition. The commentators write as exegetes and theologians. The task which they undertake is both to deal with what the texts say and to discern their meaning for faith and life. The exposition is the unified work of one interpreter.

The text on which the comment is based is the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The general availability of this translation makes the printing of a translation unnecessary and saves the space for comment. The text is divided into sections appropriate to the particular book; comment deals with passages as a whole, rather than proceeding word by word or verse by verse.

Writers have planned their volumes in light of the requirements set by the exposition of the book assigned to them. Biblical books differ in character, content, and arrangement. They also differ in the way they have been and are used in the liturgy, thought, and devotion of the church. The distinctiveness and use of particular books have been taken into account in decisions about the approach, emphasis, and use of space in the commentaries. The goal has been to allow writers to develop the format that provides for the best presentation of their interpretation.

The result, writers and editors hope, is a commentary which both explains and applies, an interpretation which deals with both the meaning and the significance of biblical texts. Each commentary reflects, of course, the writer's own approach and perception of the church and world. It could and should not be otherwise. Every interpretation of any kind is individual in that sense; it is one reading of the text. But all who work at the interpretation of Scripture in the church need the help and stimulation of a colleague's reading and understanding of the text. If these volumes serve and encourage interpretation in that way, their preparation and publication will realize their purpose.

The Editors

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INTRODUCTION

The books of Samuel present the radical transformation that occurred in the life of ancient Israel when Israel ceased to be a marginal company of tribes and became a centralized state. This extraordinary transition caused radical social change and drastic reconfigurations of social power. This reconfiguration of social power becomes clear when we compare Israel as reflected in the pre-Samuel literature of the book of Judges and the Israel of the post-Samuel literature of I Kings. Judges witnesses to an amorphous and unstable tribal mode of life, easily open to religious idolatry, syncretism, and political and military barbarism. By contrast, I Kings attests to a centralized political power that pursued an economic monopoly and claimed theological legitimacy for the new institution of monarchy. The monarchy, which centralized power and claimed divine legitimacy, fostered oppressive social relations. The books of Samuel occupy the transition point between these two social and political systems. The moves from amorphous social order to centralized power, from barbaric social practice to oppressive social relations, and from unstable order to monopolistic order are an astonishing set of moves. The books of Samuel propose to narrate how this deep shift came about and what it portended for Israel.

We suggest three distinct factors at work in this social transformation. First, we must acknowledge the influence of political power, social pressure, and technological possibility. The pressure of the Philistines, the growing power of Israelite tribes, the development of urban centers of power, the accumulation of wealth, the struggle for land, and the emergence of factions and parties were all important in the transformation. The biblical account of the transformation is not primarily interested in these matters, but they are factors that we look to first as modern historians and social critics. This is the material out of which conventional modern “histories of Israel” are constructed. The historical process is seen as a series of social,

economic, political, military, and technological pressures and as various social adjustments to those pressures.

Second, the transition was wrought through the extraordinary personality of David. The text is deeply and endlessly fascinated with David. Although David does not make his appearance in the text until I Samuel 16, the first fifteen chapters are a preparation for him. The other key figures, Samuel and Saul, function primarily as foils for David, positioning themselves vis-à-vis David, even before he makes an appearance. David is portrayed as a man of many parts, with all those parts subjected to close scrutiny in this literature. What finally preoccupies this literature, however, is the conviction that, in this passionate man, Israel discerned something more than David. The narrative articulates a purpose larger than David's purpose and a passion more faithful than even the considerable passion of David. Israel can scarcely find words for this David, to whom it does not wish to concede everything but before whom it pauses with a sense of awe.

The third factor in this transformation is Yahweh, the God of Israel. In its unembarrassed and direct way, this narrative about the transformation of Israel presents Yahweh as playing a central part in this transition, sometimes acting and speaking directly, sometimes governing in hidden ways.

The strategic requirement of the Samuel literature is to find a way of speaking about the tension, overlap, juxtaposition, and convergence of these three forces: the realism of historical-technological-social factors, the powerful person of David, and the irresistible sovereignty of Yahweh. Our interpretation must pay attention to the way the Samuel narrative characterizes the transformation as a convergence of sociohistorical, personal, and theological factors. The neglect of any one of these will diminish our reading and contribute to our misunderstanding. We should be amazed, as we take up the various texts, that this literature found a way to attend to all these factors at the same time.

We should be aware of two temptations in our exposition that would misrepresent the intent of the literature. A "religious" reading is tempted to make the story of Israel in the books of Samuel excessively pious, to overlook the tension of factions, the reality of power, the seduction of sex, the temptation to alliances, the ignobility of motivations, and the reliance on brutality. In our desire to make this story idyllic or edifying, we may not notice the "realism" that violates our pious propensity. Indeed, there is a long-established practice of an "innocent" religious reading of the Samuel

narrative. These elements of power, seduction, brutality, and ignobility, however, are all there in the text. They are all candidly acknowledged in the story. The story is honest, for example, in seeing that the Saulides (i.e., the family and party of Saul) present a serious and continuing alternative to David. Or again, the text does not flinch from the seemingly needless killing in which David may or may not be implicated. This is indeed unlauded history.

As the church has long been tempted to a pious reading, so the scholarly community falls prey to a different temptation. The scholarly community has a long history of explaining away whatever does not fit our rationalistic notions of cause and effect. Our “Enlightenment” modes of interpretation tend to disregard and explain away the direct or hidden governance of Yahweh in the transition. We have a penchant to reduce the transformation to political-technological-economic-social factors. The narrative sets itself to reject such rational reductionism, however. The troubled verdicts on Saul (I Sam. 13:13–14; 15:26–29), the divine curse on David’s house (II Sam. 12:10–11), the divine promise to that same house (II Sam. 7:14–16), and the intervention against Absalom (II Sam. 17:14), for example, are unembarrassingly pivotal to the tale. If we try to reconstruct the transformation of Israel without serious reference to Yahweh, to Yahweh’s words, deeds, and purpose, we will have constructed a telling of the transformation that decisively departs from Israel’s own recitation. Thus a rationalistic elimination of the “Yahweh factor” is no more acceptable than a pious elimination of “social realism.”

There is something crucial at stake in holding all these factors together and resisting both the pious temptation of the church and the rationalistic temptation of the guild. Indeed, it is the convergence of these factors in the telling that matters most for the Samuel narrative. I submit that the main challenge is to interpret this narrative with attention to all three elements of political and social realism, the peculiar power of David, and the inscrutable presence of Yahweh.

If the portrayal of Israel’s transformation in the Samuel narrative is indeed realistic, Davidic, and Yahwistic, the question that governs our interpretation is, How shall such a transformation be heard and presented by us who are contemporary, critical, believing interpreters? The question of how the story was to be told had to be faced by this literature. In the same way, that question must be faced by us in our interpretation. How do we

find a method that is congruent with the subject? The shape of the literature is important for our ways of interpretation.

1. The transformation of Israel from unstable tribes to centralized monarchy will not be properly rendered in an idiom that is excessively “historical” in a “realistic” sense. Such a realistic mode of historical presentation would give disproportionate attention to the social, political, and technical factors. Thus I and II Samuel avoid this manner of presentation, not simply because the narrators were too “primitive” but because they found such a mode to be inadequate for the subject. The imaginative narrative mode of presentation in I and II Samuel warns us against being preoccupied with such “historical questions” as “Did it really happen?”, “How did the ark move?” (I Sam. 6:11–12), or “Who killed Goliath?” (I Sam. 17; cf. II Sam. 21:19). Excessive attention to flat historical questions violates the intent of the text. We may conclude that the story line of the Samuel narrative is in general “historically reliable”; that conclusion, however, is beside the point for an understanding of what the narrative intends. The narrative proposes that much more is happening in Israel’s life than can be discerned by flat historical questions.

2. The transformation of Israel as understood in the Samuel narrative will not be properly rendered in an excessively “theological” idiom, one preoccupied with religious questions. Such a theological portrayal would give disproportionate attention to the role of God, the faith of Israel, and the piety of David. It would preoccupy us with religious matters that lead us away from the intent of the text. One can ask about religious issues, such as the oath of Saul (I Sam. 14:24, 44) and David’s expiation of bloodguilt (II Sam. 21:1–14). One can reflect on Yahweh’s seeming arbitrary reduction of Saul to a tragic figure or the question of whether Yahweh can change or choose and reject (I Sam. 15). To focus on such questions, however, is to tear them out of their narrative context and so distort them. The text is of course theologically self-conscious, but not in a blatant, obscurantist, or excessively pious way.

3. The shrewd convergence of all these factors of realism, Davidic distinctiveness, and Yahweh’s presence can be expressed only in an artistic idiom that means to acknowledge and transcend our conventional historical and theological questions. The artistic sensitivity of the text permits a variety of interrelations, contradictions, incongruities, and amazements that violate both our historical sobriety and our theological conviction. It is

precisely the artistic discipline and freedom of the narrative that permits us to see the odd character of Israel's transformation, to discern hidden motives, and to marvel at the astonishing convergences of the three governing factors and the unexpected newness that emerges in Israel's life. Thus our historical realism and our theological passion must be contained in and disciplined by the contours of the narrative, which is wrought with great care and imagination.

For the work of teachers, preachers, and interpreters, an artistic rendering of life is now an urgent responsibility, not only because of the character of the text but because of our social-cultural-moral circumstance. The community gathered around this text (in church, in synagogue, in religion department) is one of the few places left in contemporary society where an artistic rendering of life may be pursued. Ours is a society beset by excessive certitude and reductive truth, in which we uncritically manage our small perceptual fields. Our propensity to a "historical" reading of life runs the risk of reducing the life process to power, arms, force, and violence, because what really matters is muscle, in personal and in public life. Conversely, our attention to a "theological" reading of the life process seduces us into certitudes that quickly become too convinced and end in a monopoly that is authoritarian, coercive, and occasionally totalitarian. Our historical approach tends to end in *Realpolitik* (reducing social relations to the operation of sheer power), and our theological reading tends to end in a monopoly of certitude. Both are dangerous in a social situation where power to dehumanize and destroy is so readily available.

I submit that an artistic reading that follows the contours of the narrative is not only faithful to the intended convergences of the text concerning realism, David, and Yahweh but is peculiarly required in our cultural situation of brute power and monopolistic certitude. This artistic rendering lets us be open to the surprises, ambiguities, incongruities, surpluses, and gifts present in Israel's life, wrought by God, through which humaneness sometimes emerges and where holiness is strangely present. What strikes one about this artistic reading of Israel's transformation in the Samuel narratives is the power of speech in these stories. People talk to one another, and their talking matters. The playful possibility of speech is at work in the public process of Israel. People listen and are changed by such speech, and God is drawn deeply into the conversation. That is how Israel discerns what has happened in its memory and in its life.

I believe, moreover, that the shapers of the Samuel text intended that each return to the text would evoke a fresh discernment of life as a place where the power of speaking and listening matters to God and to us. My hoped-for outcome in this commentary is that sustained interpretation of the Samuel text may aid in evoking and convening communities of artistic discourse where conversations about power, personality, and providence can be enacted and where these factors are all noticed, honored, and celebrated as constitutive of life. Against the conventional pious reading of the church and against the conventional historical-rational readings of the guild, we have pursued another way of interpreting. I believe we are at an important and urgent threshold of finding a way of taking the text more nearly on its own terms. If this judgment is right, we have important work to do. The next generation of teachers and interpreters may be weaned away from “facticity” and “truth” to a more dangerous conversation.

It will be clear to students of the Samuel literature that in shaping my commentary in this way I have made a number of important decisions (most of which are intentional). I have not attempted to deal at all with the immensity of textual problems, on which see especially McCarter. I have not attempted to assess historical issues, on which see Mayes and Soggin. I have stayed clear of the thicket of scholarly discussion of literary composition, and I have not joined the debate about Noth’s magisterial hypothesis on redaction. These are important questions, but they are not the burden of this work.

I have organized the material in rather conventional units, which largely go back to the work of Rost and reflect a rough scholarly consensus. I hope that, in this organization of the material, my inclination in a canonical direction will be discerned. I am persuaded by the intent of Childs’s work, even if my concrete ways of proceeding are different from his. I have attempted to deal with each text in terms of the whole story.

Focus on “the whole story” is an urgent need in our interpretive situation. We have learned to read the Bible either in bits and pieces or according to a dogmatic presupposition that domesticates the text. Artistic attention to the shape and flow on the whole does not promise a “true” reading or a “final” reading but only *this* reading *now*. The text, like our life, is so open that it will hardly stand still for our interpretation. The interpretive act itself is a recurring decision not to “congeal.” A recent

novel by Gail Godwin contains a telling and penetrating conversation about congealing (p. 4). One character, Ursula, instructs the narrator, Justin:

“There are two kinds of people,” she once decreed to me emphatically. “One kind you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very *nice* self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas the other kind keeps moving, changing. With these people, you can never say, ‘X stops here,’ or ‘Now I know all there is to know about Y.’ That doesn’t mean they’re unstable. Ah, no, far from it. They are *fluid*. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must be constantly on your guard, Justin, against congealing.”

The live word resists our congealing, in life and in interpretation. That does not mean interpretation is unstable. It means, rather, that we may continue to expect surprises and can never say, “Now I know all about the text.”

PART ONE

The Rise of Samuel

I SAMUEL 1—7

[He] increased in wisdom
and in stature, and in favor
with God and humankind.

Luke 2:52

These chapters have Samuel as their lead character. They trace Samuel's rise in authority from his birth until he is established in Israel as the foremost leader. He is acknowledged as the bearer of God's word (3:19–21) and as the administrator of justice (7:17). Indeed, Samuel is characterized as responsible for the life of Israel in every aspect.

Critical scholarship is generally agreed that chapters 1–7 probably developed as at least three independent literary units, the narrative of Samuel's birth and youth (1–3), the narrative of the ark (4–6), and the account of Samuel's leadership as a judge (7). Willis, however, has made a strong case for the structural and redactional coherence of the seven chapters (1971, 1972, 1979). Together they bear witness to the faith, power, leadership, and cruciality of Samuel for the faith and life of Israel. Samuel embodies ancient Israel's traditional covenantal commitments, which were as important for the public, political life of Israel as for the faithful practice of religious Yahwism.

I Samuel 1—3

The Legitimacy of Samuel

These chapters trace the emergence of Samuel as Yahweh's authorized leader in Israel. At the center stands the "Song of Hannah" (2:1–10), which not only celebrates the gift of Samuel but articulates Israel's future (and future king) as an anticipated gift of Yahweh. Every assertion of chapters 1–3, from the gracious birth of Samuel (1:3–28) to the dream theophany (3:1–10), to the final statement of Samuel's authorization (3:19–21), witnesses to the decisive role of Yahweh in Israel's new beginning. Every actor in the entire Samuel narrative, Hannah, Samuel, Saul, David, and the many lesser players, are all creatures of God's sovereignty and agents of God's intended future. These chapters disclose how it is that Yahweh reshapes Israel's historical process for the sake of the new king and the coming kingdom. Interpretation that takes the whole narrative in context asks how this Samuel, who is a gift of God's power, serves the coming kingdom.

I Samuel 1:1–28

Troubled Israel, as the books of Samuel begin, is waiting. Israel is portrayed as a marginal community. We are soon to learn from the narrative that Israel is made marginal by the power and the pressure of the Philistines. In the face of that external threat, Israel is politically weak and economically disadvantaged. But there is also a moral, theological dimension to Israel's trouble. By the end of the book of Judges, Israel is shown to be a community in moral chaos, engaged in brutality (chs. 19–21) and betrayed by undisciplined religion (chs. 17–18). Israel does not seem to have the capacity or the will to extricate itself from its troubles.

As the Samuel narrative unfolds, we discover that Israel is waiting for a king who will protect, defend, gather, liberate, and legitimate the community. Indeed, Israel is finally waiting for a quite particular king: for David! When David finally appears, Israel has the assurance that "this is

he” (I Sam. 16:12). With David’s appearance Israel’s fortunes begin to change, and the change is known in Israel to be the work of God.

The story, however, does not rush to David. There is a long waiting; the object for which Israel waits is not known concretely beforehand. The waiting has its bitterness, for Israel in the meantime is afflicted by its troubled social, political, and economic situation. The waiting is confused, for Israel cannot know for certain where its future lies, how to appropriate that future, or how to wait faithfully for it. Indeed, Israel cannot even know just now that it has a future. The narrative leads us, along with ancient Israel, through that long season of bitter, confused, uncertain waiting. It may be that the narrator knows, well ahead of the telling, what the outcome will be. But as in every good story, we are not told too much too soon.

The story of I and II Samuel turns on the surprising gift of David, who makes all things right. The story, however, does not begin with the gift of David. It begins with desperate need, so that when the gift is offered we will be amazed by its grace. The narrator holds in abeyance the impressiveness, certitude, and triumph of David and begins with other, less formidable figures who inhabit Israel’s move toward kingship. The sequence of “great men” from Samuel to Saul to David is the obvious story line of the narrative. Even with this triad of impressive and dominating figures, however, we are still not at the beginning of this troubled waiting.

In a daring move, back behind “the great men,” the narrative locates the origin of Israel’s future and the source of its “great leaders” in the story of a bereft, barren woman named Hannah (1:2). The story of Israel’s waiting that moves from trouble to well-being begins neither in grand theory nor in palace splendor nor in doxological celebration. It begins, rather, in a single Ephraimite family, whose father has a solid family pedigree (1:1) but whose mother is barren—without children, and without prospect of children. Our story of waiting begins in barrenness wherein there is no hint of a future. Israel’s waiting (which culminates in David) begins as Hannah’s waiting begins, in hopelessness (cf. Gen. 11:30; 26:22; 29:31; Luke 1:36). Those who read the narrative are invited to listen and to notice—in the midst of such barren hopelessness—that fruitful waiting, hoping, and receiving can indeed happen.

The narrative of Elkanah-Hannah-Samuel (ch. 1) stands as our entry point into Israel’s astonished waiting. The narrative of chapter 1 functions as a paradigm for the entire drama of Israel’s faithful waiting as it is

presented in the Samuel narrative. This chapter is a narrative complete in itself; it begins in a problem (v. 2) and ends in a resolution (v. 28). The problem is barrenness: no child, no son, no heir, no future, no historical possibility. The resolution is worship, with a son given and a future opened. The dramatic flow of the narrative is the process through which the problem of barrenness is transformed into a resolution of glad, trustful, yielding praise.

Israel's drama from problem to resolution, then, is well under way before and without David. That dramatic movement from hopelessness to gift has as its proper subjects those who are, like Hannah, barren and bereft. It has as its unmistakable agent Yahweh, the one who can turn barrenness to birth, vexation to praise, isolation to worship. The narrative is a witness to Yahweh's transformative power, which creates a new historical possibility where none existed.

This is no ordinary narrative. This is no "natural history." This is a history which from its beginning refers outside itself to a sovereign will that overrides Israel's chaos, to a comfort that overcomes Israel's bitterness. This story does indeed wait for David, but the time until David comes is no empty time waiting to be filled. It is time already filled with the power of Yahweh to begin again. This first chapter is a narrative of Yahweh's power and will to begin again, to create a newness in history precisely out of despair. This newness out of barrenness (and therefore out of despair) violates our reason and our reasonableness. Speaking reasonably, Hannah would have no child and Elkanah would have no heir. Israel would have no future. That exhausted rationality, however, is now shattered and defeated. Those overly fixed in their despair now have their life made over by the power of Yahweh. The function of the narrative is again and again to make life over by this inexplicable but relentless transformative power.

1:1–2. The problem is clearly and immediately articulated. The man with his impressive genealogy (v. 1) is matched to a barren woman (v. 2). From his fathers, Elkanah has a proud past. With his wife, however, he has no future. The story invites us with Israel to reflect on the question, How is a new future possible amid the barrenness that renders us bitter, hopeless, and fruitless? The dramatic answer to this question is articulated in four scenes.

1:3–8. This scene is a transaction between Elkanah and Hannah. The problem is barrenness. The incongruity in the scene is between the love Elkanah has for Hannah, which is not to be doubted (vv. 5, 8), and the fact of barrenness wrought by Yahweh (vv. 5, 6). Hannah's barrenness overrides the power of Elkanah's love. The outcome is a provoked woman, abused by her rival, Peninnah (v. 6), more vexed by Yahweh's foreclosure of her future. Hannah's response to her trouble is depression, grief, and loss of appetite (v. 7).

1:9–18. Hannah interacts with Eli, the priest at Shiloh. Her husband is absent in this scene. The action of this longer scene largely consists of three speeches. First, Hannah makes a vow (v. 11). She addresses Yahweh, the same God who in verses 5–6 had caused her barrenness. Her vow seeks to evoke a new gift from God. The vow is a standard part of a complaint prayer. As Hannah is bitter in her barrenness, so she will be grateful in her anticipated fruitfulness. She vows that the son of her womb will be preserved for obedience only to Yahweh. At the beginning we have a clue about how and why Samuel became such a sturdy champion of Yahwistic faith. He is predestined by his mother to be such a champion.

The second speech of Hannah is one of self-vindication to refute Eli's mistaken assessment of her (vv. 15–16). He had thought her to be a drunken woman (v. 13). She is not drunk; she is desperate. Her desperation leads to an act of candid piety, speaking her grief and vexation precisely to Yahweh. She knows whom to address.

The third speech is a response of Eli, an assurance and a benediction (v. 17). The priest asserts that "the God of Israel will (may) hear and answer." The exchange between the two is thoroughly Yahwistic. The priestly answer functions characteristically to resolve the complaint. The scene enacts intense covenantal faith in which the attentiveness of Yahweh is mediated by the priest. Hannah asks; Yahweh answers. (See the same kind of interaction in 7:9.) The narrative conclusion indicates that the priestly assurance marks the decisive turn in the story. Hannah believes Eli. She does not doubt "that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:45). As a result, the grief and despair of verse 8 are nullified (v. 18). She is a new, restored woman with a new chance in life, caused by a word of assurance authoritatively spoken. She believed the word!

1:19–20. In this scene Hannah is again with Elkanah, as in scene 1. The words are terse and minimal, but the account is sufficient to implement the priestly promise of verse 17. Yahweh does remember (v. 19). This is precisely what Hannah had asked, that Yahweh should remember and not forget (v. 11). Yahweh is a powerful rememberer; and when Yahweh remembers the partner and the promise, newness becomes possible (v. 20; cf. Gen. 8:1; 19:29; 30:22). The new son is the one “asked” for and the one graciously given. The hopeless one (Hannah) is now the one given a future. As is characteristic in Israel’s text, the drama leading up to the hoped-for event receives the most attention. The gift itself only implements that which the drama has anticipated. When the story finally gets to the actual gift, things can happen quickly. Nineteen verses prepare for the birth; one verse narrates it.

1:21–28. The fourth scene is structurally quite complicated. Hannah lingers behind Elkanah when he goes up to the temple, but in due season she comes to Shiloh, back to the priest Eli. Her business in Shiloh is to pay her vow (vv. 26–28). In offering her thanksgiving, Hannah is aware of the amazing sequence by which her barrenness has eventuated in birth. The one whom she had “asked” is now given back. Hannah is faithful; Yahweh is powerful. Hannah is appropriately grateful. In place of despair has come gratitude, resulting in submission and praise.

The resolution is glad worship (v. 28), a trusting yielding, which is Israel’s proper posture for the new story of monarchy now about to begin. Hannah’s “now therefore” indicates the climax of the narrative and the resolution of the problem. Her offer of the boy is a faithful counterpart to her vow. Barrenness ends, by the power of God, in glad, trustful worship.

This narrative, constructed according to the conventions of the genre of birth narrative, is carefully crafted and tightly disciplined. Its outside perimeters (vv. 1–2, 28) show that the structure of Israel’s faith is one of problem-resolution. This structure is presented through the speaking parts of complaint (vv. 11, 15–16) and assurance (v. 17), which then issues in thanksgiving (vv. 25–27). By transposing the action of problem-resolution or even barrenness-birth to complaint-assurance, the story turns our attention away from the event of the birth itself to the drama of fidelity between Hannah and Yahweh. The subject of the narrative is Yahweh’s astonishing fidelity and Hannah’s responding fidelity.

The reality of need, and explicitly barrenness, is not distinctly an Israelite problem. The narrative, however, invites a Yahwistic rendering of human trouble and its resolution. Yahweh stands at the center of each scene:

1. “The LORD had closed her womb” (vv. 5, 6)
2. “The God of Israel grant your petition” (v. 17)
3. “The LORD remembered her” (v. 19)
4. “The LORD has granted me my petition” (v. 27)

Israel’s life has to do with the power and fidelity of God. In the chapters to come, Israel will be tempted to flex its muscles, to be inordinately impressed with power and pomp and privilege—and with David! This narrative stands poignantly as a counteraffirmation to what is to come. Israel’s new life emerges out of barrenness by the power of God. That power is inexplicable, but also irresistible. That power is evoked, summoned, and triggered by lowly Hannah, who had no virtue, no claim, no capacity, only a stubborn insistence addressed to Yahweh and a readiness to yield back all good gifts. The narrative ends in yielding praise (v. 28). Such praise is the proper posture in which Israel’s new life begins again.

Our modern propensity to inquire about the biological miracle of the birth is subdued by the flow of the narrative. The narrative wants us to notice Yahweh as the key actor. The narrative invites us to wait in our trouble with such a focus on God, to see if prayers can be uttered, if vows can be made, if gifts can be received, if thanks can be rendered, if worship can be enacted. When all of that becomes possible among us, we are prepared for the story of Israel’s new life.

I Samuel 2:1–10

The birth of a child to a barren woman is not a routine matter at any time, certainly not in ancient Israel. The birth is first of all an occasion for unmitigated celebration. The deepest yearning of the mother has been inexplicably fulfilled. Hannah’s worth, her dignity, and her rightful place with her husband have been restored. Hannah must sing! Second, however, this surprising birth is perceived to be more than a personal, familial event. The birth is an assertion that concerns the entire community. It is an assertion that the life and future of Israel (like the womb of Hannah) have

been reopened. Hannah and the community of Hannah are not fated. If a son is given in the midst of barrenness, who knows what else may yet be given, perhaps even well-being in the midst of this troubled community! The birth is not a private wonder but a gift of possibility for all of Israel. Israel must sing with Hannah!

This birth is not wrought by biological manipulation or by dark, managed religious secrets. It is pure gift, wrought in the intense conversation of complaint and answer, of promise and fidelity, of need and response. The narrator (and Hannah and Israel) does not doubt that the birth concerns Yahweh. Yahweh has mobilized awesome life-giving power in the midst of Israel's hopeless deathliness. Thus the song is one of doxology. Israel must sing with Hannah in praise to Yahweh! While the newborn son is celebrated, the song finally concerns not the son but Yahweh. The accent is on the Giver, not the gift. Precious as the gift is, the Giver is the one who outruns Israel's awed expectation. Praise is the only speech appropriate to the occasion.

Hannah sings a very special song with reference to a concrete miracle. In doing so, however, she joins her voice to a song Israel has already long been singing. Israel is peculiarly a community of doxology. Its life consists in praise to God for what God has done and for what God characteristically continues to do. Thus Hannah sings no new song; she appropriates a song already known in Israel. The "Song of Hannah" thus is likely to have been taken from Israel's repertoire of public hymns. The song has standard hymnic elements; it speaks in unqualified ways of Yahweh's power and dominion. It seems to contain concrete thanksgiving for remembered gifts, but these concrete memories are now generalized as characteristic of Yahweh. What Yahweh has done (in our memory and experience), Yahweh characteristically can and does do.

The song has public, national dimensions in speaking of enemies (v. 1), war (v. 4), and eventually even of a king (v. 10). It is likely that the song was originally used by the royal establishment to celebrate monarchical victories in war. Now, however, the song is appropriated by the tradition of Samuel in a double interpretive move. First, the great public song (reflected in Psalm 113) has been drawn close to the personal family celebration of an astonishing son. Second, however, the tradition which appropriates the song for Hannah is mindful that the focus of the Samuel tradition is not simply on the freshly birthed Samuel but on the emergence of kingship in the story

yet to be told. The newly arrived Samuel, before the story is finished, will be a kingmaker and a king breaker. Thus the personal joy of Hannah is tilted toward the coming greatness of Israel under David. The poem, given its original usage as a royal psalm and given its present usage for family celebration, requires a double-focused singing. Israel never separates intimate family joy from public destiny. When mother Hannah sings, she sings about her joy, but she also sings about Israel's public prospect.

The song is enveloped by reference to "my horn" (*qeren*; RSV has "strength" in v. 1) and "horn of his anointed" (*qeren*; RSV has "power" in v. 10). The song begins in celebration of Hannah's "raised horn" and concludes with the "raised horn" of the messiah. The entire song is about a "raised horn," which means visible elevation to worth, dignity, power, prestige, and well-being. This is the song of a woman until recently barren and of a people until recently oppressed. Their joy in the new "raised horn" is commensurate with their astonishment at this inexplicable change of status, inexplicable except for the power of Yahweh, who can only be praised.

2:1–2. The main theological themes in Hannah's incredible change of status are introduced. Hannah sings of "my heart, my horn, my mouth, my enemies" (v. 1), but these are placed in stark contrast to "*your deliverance*" (author's emphasis). It is Hannah's joy but Yahweh's power. Verse 2 complements verse 1 by a powerful triad of "none, none, none," asserting there is no other like Yahweh, thee, our God. This song is indeed a celebration of Yahweh's incomparability. Yahweh is the one who has the *power to transform* and the *willingness to intervene* on behalf of the powerless. Both qualities are required. Power to transform without willingness to intervene ends in a haughty transcendence. Willingness to intervene without power to transform ends in a pitiful sentimentality. Yahweh is neither haughty nor pitiful but possesses, as no other, the combination of qualities and inclinations that matter to this marginal singing community. Israel throws this song defiantly against the reality of its marginality. At the outset of the Samuel narrative of Israel's historical transformation, Israel gladly testifies to the odd fidelity of this God who works the change.

2:3–8. These verses provide specific cases of transformation worked by Yahweh’s power to transform and willingness to intervene. Yahweh presides over all human actions and is not deterred by or overly impressed by human actions or human resistances (v. 3; cf. Prov. 16:9). It is Yahweh’s capacity in the face of human action that gives hope to the weak and the marginal. Yahweh’s intervention changes the disproportion of power and potential in human transactions. Thus in war the mighty may not win and the feeble may be strong (v. 4; cf. Prov. 21:30–31). This judgment about war anticipates the triumphs of Israel to come, perhaps with particular reference to David’s paradigmatic defeat of Goliath (I Sam. 17).

The matter of transformation draws closer to Hannah’s own case in verse 5. First there is a reversal of the full and the hungry. Then there is a reversal of the barren and the fruitful. Notice how polemical and partisan the claim is. It is not said that the hungry will *also* be full or the barren will *also* have children. Rather, the full and the fruitful will be displaced by the hungry and the barren and will now suffer the fate so long assigned to the others. The full now receive as their destiny the hunger they had imposed in previous arrangements. The tone of the lyric bespeaks a well-established social resentment against those who have been too well off for too long, who now are consigned precisely to the loss of what they most valued (cf. Luke 16:19–31).

After a statement about war, food, and children, verse 6 states the extreme case, life and death. This God presides in singular sovereignty over the gift of life and death and bestows these gifts in utter knowing (v. 3), without offering rationale or justification (cf. Deut. 32:39). In the purview of Hannah there are no secondary causes, no extenuating circumstances. There is only Yahweh. To those who are now full and now fruitful, this may seem arbitrary. To those who are now hungry and now barren, however, the reality of Yahweh permits powerful hope, which moves social possibility beyond the administered rationality of the political-economic establishment (cf. Luke 6:20–21, 24–25). This is hope beyond the defined boundaries of current social reality, a hope most urgent for those excluded by present boundaries. Such an “irrational” hope is an act of faith that all of God’s gifts have not already been committed to present forms and arrangements. God has new, powerful gifts to give and is now about to spread them among the powerless and marginal.

The power of social resentment and social possibility becomes more explicit in verses 7–8, which sing of social inversion concerning the poor and rich, the high and low. In verse 8 we are able to see the dangerous social implications of resurrection faith. This is the real “raising” Yahweh will do, raising to power and social possibility. In that peculiar, powerful act of Yahweh, all present social distinctions and political disproportions are overcome and dismissed. In the midst of this song, the social privileges of princes are sung into nullity. One can imagine the haughtiness of Peninnah (1:4–6), who seemed so privileged. One can imagine the arrogance of the Philistines, who seemed so secure. Later one can sense (and resent) the pride of Babylon, who seemed ordained to dominate the world forever (Isa. 47:1–2). All it takes to change those arrangements of tyranny and exploitation in the imagination of Israel, however, is one clear doxology. All it takes for a new possibility is one act of Yahweh, besides whom there is no other.

In verse 8c the song makes a remarkable interpretive connection. In verses 5 and 7–8a the focus has been on the hungry, barren, poor, and needy. In a doxological ejaculation, Hannah/Israel asserts that Yahweh is the creator who has established the world on pillars, which belong only to Yahweh (v. 8a). The turn of the doxology is marked by an emphatic “for,” which gives the reason for Hannah’s confidence and joy. The hope of the poor and weak is rooted in the foundational power of the creator. The hope of Israel and the power of God are joined by this preposition “for.” The deep-set pillars of Yahweh permit the world not to sink into chaos. The world all belongs to Yahweh, and Yahweh has made it possible. Yahweh presides over the world and therefore can do as Yahweh wills with it. Verse 8c, however, is more than a statement of power. It is an assertion of Yahweh’s utter freedom. Yahweh need not bow before, yield to, or defer to any prince or noble. Yahweh need not conform to any legitimated social arrangement. Yahweh is free to reorder the earth and will do so on behalf of the marginal.

The poem thus links the majesty of Yahweh’s sovereignty over creation with the hope of the marginal. That connection is succinctly asserted in Deuteronomy 10:14, 17–18:

Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.... For the LORD your God is God of gods and LORD of lords, the great, the mighty, and

the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

Yahweh's cosmic power is mobilized precisely for the socially marginal. No wonder Hannah sings! The worldly hope of the weak is rooted in the power that holds the world together. No wonder the marginal in Israel join Hannah in her song! No wonder their songs must be addressed to Yahweh, who is the only one with such sovereign power, the only one attentive to the marginal.

2:9–10. Here a somewhat changed theme is presented. The God praised is the judge who will preside over all the earth and all powers in it (v. 10). As judge, Yahweh will not only pronounce judgments but will actively intervene to implement those judgments. Yahweh will distinguish between the “faithful ones” and the “wicked” (v. 9a). The faithful are those who trust God's promises, receive God's gifts, and keep vows to God—people like Hannah. The wicked are those who rely on their own strength—people like Peninnah or the Philistines. Against the judging, ruling power of Yahweh, arrogant human strength cannot prevail (v. 9b). No power, no social arrangement, no alternative claim to authority can withstand the rule of Yahweh (cf. I Cor. 1:25).

We are told at the conclusion of the song (v. 10) that the rule of Yahweh is in the strength of the king. How odd! At the very beginning of the book of Samuel, long before Saul or David or any king appears in Israel, the poetry has Hannah assert that the coming king will be an agent for the poor, needy, hungry, barren (cf. Ps. 72:1–4, 12–14). This poem anticipates the hope placed in kingship for time to come. The poem, moreover, articulates the criteria by which subsequent kings are to be evaluated. All of this is placed on the grateful, expectant lips of Hannah.

We had thought this was Hannah's song about her son. It is. It concerns her “horn.” The song, however, breaks out beyond Hannah. It now trusts in and anticipates the “horn of David,” who is the true horn of Israel. It anticipates that Yahweh will reorder social reality, precisely in the interest of those too poor and too weak to make their own way.

In the first instance this poem is indeed Hannah's song. It is the voice of a joyous woman stunningly rescued from barrenness. It is at the same time, however, a powerful poem that has futures well beyond Hannah. Childs has observed (pp. 272–273) that this song provides an “interpretive key” for the

books of Samuel. That is, the power and willingness of Yahweh to intrude, intervene, and invert is the main theme of this narrative. We watch while the despised ones (Israel, David) become the great ones. At the center of this startling inversion is the eighth son (16:11–12), who sits with princes and inherits a seat of honor (2:8).

This song becomes the song of Mary and the song of the church (Luke 1:46–55), as the faithful community finds in Jesus the means through which Yahweh will turn and right the world. The Song of Mary, derived from Hannah, becomes the source for Luke’s radical portrayal of Jesus. This song becomes a source of deep and dangerous hope in the world wherever the prospect and possibility of human arrangements have been exhausted. When people can no longer believe the promises of the rulers of this age, when the gifts of well-being are no longer given through established channels, this song voices an alternative to which the desperate faithful cling.

First Samuel 2:1–10 begins in barrenness redeemed; barrenness, however, is the penultimate humiliation. The last threat is death; and the best, most astonishing gift is resurrection life. Hannah and Israel sing of the one who “brings to life,” who breaks the power of death. It does not matter if that power is experienced as barrenness, as despair, or as oppression. Hannah flings this song buoyantly in the face of the power of death. Her act is an act of daring hope, rooted in a concrete gift, waiting for more of life yet to be given. Our interpretive responsibility now is to see who among us can join this dangerous, daring song to this same God who has power to transform and willingness to intervene. That power and willingness are the source of Israel’s only consolation (Luke 2:25) and are the energy that drives the Samuel narrative to its remarkable Davidic possibility.

I Samuel 2:11—4:1a

This narrative unit has two purposes: (1) to articulate the legitimacy of Samuel as “the leader” for Israel in the crisis to come and (2), conversely, to discredit the failed leadership of the house of Eli. We have seen in 1:3–28 that Samuel is a special gift from God (to Hannah) and a special gift back to God (from Hannah). The narrative of chapters 1–3 wants us to understand that Samuel’s origin and his destiny are both peculiarly in God’s hand and

for God's purpose. This account of Samuel's rise to power (2:11—4:1a) is no ordinary historical report but is a witness to how God's intent in Israel is implemented. Part of the working of God's intent in Israel is the nullification of the old priesthood, which is accomplished through this narrative.

2:11–36. “The rise of Samuel” is narrated in counterpoint to the account of “Eli's fall.” Samuel's rise is punctuated by a series of carefully placed statements reporting his growth to manhood and his maturation in faith. There is irony in the fact that he is nurtured in faith by Eli, the very one whom he displaces.

Samuel's growth and maturation are narrated in these statements: “The boy ministered to the LORD, in the presence of Eli the priest” (2:11); “The boy ... grew in the presence of the LORD” (2:21). (Whereas the beginning is in the presence of Eli, the rhetoric is now escalated to the presence of Yahweh.) “The boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD” (2:26). “Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground” (3:19). In the last three of these notices the verb “grew” (*gdl*) is used. By the end of the narrative, Samuel arrives at manhood.

His is a manhood of enormous authority, destined by Yahweh and recognized by Israel. The narrative has moved in broad strokes to get to the main point, the destiny of Israel on its way to kingship—led there by Samuel, albeit with mixed signals. Samuel's growth has been nurtured by Eli. It has been governed from the beginning, however, by Yahweh.

The countertheme of the narrative concerns the failure of the old priestly order of Eli (and his sons). Eli had misunderstood his initial contact with Hannah (1:13). By the time of our text, Eli is older and even more inept. The initiative for priesthood has been taken by his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who are degenerate and exploitative. The family and order of Eli are dealt with in three sections of the narrative.

First, verses 12–17 are a descriptive report, indicating the ruthless, cynical use of priestly power by Eli's sons. Like Samuel, the sons of Eli are called *na'ar* (“young men”). “The sin of the young men was very great” (v. 17). The term “great” (*gdl*) is the same term used for Samuel. The linguistic parallel seems to sharpen the contrast intentionally. Both Samuel and the

sons of Eli are “great.” Samuel is “great” as a mature man of God, Eli’s sons are “great” in sin.

In the second narrative element, Eli himself is inept but not evil (vv. 22–25). Eli rebukes his sons, but to no avail. Eli is still a man of responsible faith.

The third element of the narrative concerning Eli (vv. 27–33) is exceedingly difficult. It narrates the divine decree that the house of Eli will be displaced by a different priestly house. The decree is in the mouth of an unnamed “man of God.”

We may treat the text in two quite distinct ways, historically and theologically. The text is of historical importance because it reflects the conflicted relationship between various priestly groups or orders in the life of Israel. That history begins with a recital of the history of Eli with Yahweh (vv. 27–30*a*), not unlike David’s history with Yahweh related later on (II Sam. 7:8–9). Eli’s house has been chosen by God for the priesthood (v. 28). His house is presumably the Mushite priesthood rooted in Moses, identified with the Levites, and embodied subsequently in the person of Abiathar. God has made a promise to this priestly order “for ever” (v. 30).

According to this tendentious narrative, however, the sons of Eli have been so extravagantly disobedient to Yahweh that the promise of God is abrogated (vv. 30*b*–32). These sons of Eli “do not know” Yahweh (v. 12). They will not listen to (obey) Eli (v. 25). They are brazen and cynical. As a result of their disobedience, Yahweh nullifies the eternal promise and ends the authority of the house of Eli. This is a remarkable decree, for it reports Yahweh’s nullification of a promise made “for ever.” It turns out that Yahweh’s promise “for ever” was stringently conditional. It is an understatement to conclude that Eli’s house did not meet the conditions! In this theological tradition, responsive obedience is required even for God’s most sweeping promises.

The second part of this astonishing decree moves well beyond the horizon of the Samuel narrative. Verses 33–36 probably represent a later attempt to legitimate subsequent developments of priestly power and authority. Cross has proposed that as verses 27–32 narrate the end of the Mushite priesthood, verses 33–36 anticipate the priesthood of Zadok, which is linked to the Aaronite order. The “faithful priest” of the “sure house” (v. 35) is Zadok, who turns out to be the priestly “winner” in the Solomonic crisis (cf. I Kings 2:35; 4:2). The oracle, serving the interests of the house

of Zadok, thus places in God's mouth authorization for the displacement of the Mushite priesthood by the Zadokite order.

The transition of authority from the one priestly order to the other is marked by two interesting notes. First, an exception is made for one man who shall not be cut off (v. 33). This refers to Abiathar, a trusted priest of David, banished by Solomon but not killed (cf. I Kings 2:26–27). Second, verse 36 suggests that the older order may endure, but it will be in a dependent position, receiving its keep and sustenance from the now powerful new order.

From a historical perspective, this peculiar text reflects a change in the arrangement of priestly power and authority. The divine decree is probably an intrusion in the text and demonstrates how narrative can be used for purposes of propaganda and establishing legitimacy. The rise of the house of Zadok as such, however, has no bearing on the narrative of Samuel. It is of interest only to a later political force that has made good and partisan use of the narrative.

The decree of this “man of God” does, however, serve the theological interest of the Samuel narrative directly, because it shows God's decision to terminate the house of Eli. Without looking ahead to the coming house of Zadok, the nullification of Eli's house is of interest, because it makes way for the priestly authority of Samuel. Aside from later historical, propagandistic interests, the narrative asserts that God is indeed doing “a new thing” in Samuel. The very Eli who nurtured Samuel in faith is now displaced by Samuel. This displacement happens not because of Samuel's aggressiveness but because of Yahweh's unshakable commitment to the leadership of Samuel. The entire narrative thus prepares us for the new venture of faith and politics for which Samuel will provide the crucial leadership. That leadership, however, is fully in the service of and obedient to the purposes of Yahweh, who now wills a sharp turn in the shape and destiny of Israel. For theological exposition, it is this fresh authorization of Samuel that is the crucial issue. The intrusive allusion to a later priesthood leads us away from the main thrust of the narrative.

3:1—4:1a. The main story line now resumes. Fishbane has shown how chapter 3 is crafted to legitimate a new leadership and to delegitimize the old leadership. This innocent-looking narrative functions in the context of a serious struggle for power. Samuel is again “the boy” (v. 1). He continues to

be subservient to Eli and obedient to Yahweh. The dream report, perhaps the best-known story of Samuel's early life, is given in verses 2–14. That story is too often taken simply as an idyllic account of childlike faith. It is that, but it is much more than that, for the dream narrative is used to articulate a most disruptive, devastating assertion (vv. 11–14). The form of the narrative is a dream theophany in which a decisive word is given from outside conventional human experience. Samuel is available for this communication from God and perfectly responsive (v. 10). Moreover he is fully supported by Eli, who is now dependent upon him (v. 18).

The juxtaposition of verses 9–10 and 15–18 suggests a subtle treatment of the relation between Samuel (who now comes to power) and Eli (who now loses power). Patient, caring Eli instructs Samuel in his response to God (vv. 9–10). Eli gives Samuel the very words he is to use in response to Yahweh (v. 9), and Samuel uses those very words (v. 10). In that scene, young Samuel is completely dependent upon knowing Eli.

The roles between the two are then reversed (vv. 15–18). Eli has forfeited the word of Yahweh, and it is given to Samuel. Eli is now dependent upon Samuel to learn the word of Yahweh. Earlier, Samuel is uncertain and must be guided. Now he confidently receives the oracle but is reluctant to tell Eli, because the oracle is against Eli (vv. 15–18). It is surely intentional irony that in verse 16 Samuel makes the same response to Eli that he does in the earlier text, "Here I am." While the response is the same and Samuel's deference to Eli is consistent, there is no doubt that the power has shifted. The young innocent one is now authorized; the old knowing one has become fully dependent upon Samuel. The reversal of roles is not stated directly, but the narrative is formed so that the point becomes unavoidable. Yahweh does indeed "raise up and bring down."

In using the dream theophany, our interest is often on the idyllic childlike exchange of verses 4–10. When the message of the dream theophany is given, however, there is nothing idyllic or childlike about it (vv. 11–14). The substance of the message should receive our primary attention. That substance is hard, abrasive, and devastating. The house of Eli had been promised authority "for ever" (2:30). Now that same house will be punished "for ever" (3:13). The judgment will be so harsh that "ears will tingle" in dismay (v. 11; cf. II Kings 21:12). The verdict of Yahweh is as sure as it is devastating. There is no appeal or recourse.

The problem has been the sons of Eli, not Eli himself. However, Eli must pay by having everything taken away. When he hears the message, Eli is a model of piety and acquiescence (v. 18). In this terrible moment of decision, Eli and Samuel are together in obedience as they had been at the outset. Both of them accept the verdict of Yahweh. For Samuel that verdict offers power and authority. For Eli the same verdict offers only grief and humiliation. For both the verdict is unquestioned. The narrative concerns the sure, irresistible power of Yahweh's will, which now turns the course of Israel's life. Eli had nurtured Samuel in obedience. Now the two of them stand together to face the hard, powerful will of Yahweh.

The focus of 3:1–19, however, is not on the ending announced for Eli. The accent rather is on the new beginning now to be made with obedient Samuel. Samuel is characterized in the narrative as a voice outside conventional authority. He hears Yahweh's powerful word (3:19—4:1a). Israel must now heed Samuel. The "word is rare," the vision is infrequent (v. 1), yet Samuel receives a word (v. 11). In the end the narrative (and Israel) knows that Yahweh is with Samuel (v. 19). He is a bearer of revelation, as he is a child of miraculous birth. He is the one in whom Israel's destiny for the future is vested. The peculiar authorization of Samuel is accomplished in accordance with "the word of the Lord," but the actual working out of God's will comes with "the word of Samuel" (4:1a). All Samuel's words must be heeded. None of his words must be permitted to fall to the ground (v. 19).

The final paragraph of the unit holds together nicely the staggering gift of God's revealed word and the concreteness of Samuel's word (3:19—4:1a). Samuel's word is never quite equated with the divine decree but is surely authorized by that decree. The proximity of the word of Samuel to the word of Yahweh is not unlike the double word in Jeremiah 1:1–3, where the "word of Yahweh" is given in the "words of Jeremiah." The Bible characteristically holds together and yet distinguishes the will and decree of Yahweh and the concrete historical *form* which that will must take. The will and purpose of Yahweh are brought to concrete expression through various persons, among them Samuel and Jeremiah. Israel must take the human announcement of God's will with great seriousness. Yet the careful wording of the matter suggests that the Bible resists the equation of divine will and human expression. The human word is as much as Israel receives. It is a word that must be taken seriously, but it is not finally the word of Yahweh.

It is “the word of Samuel” that comes to Israel (4:1). In this careful, subtle distinction, Israel struggles with the relentlessly historical mode of its faith.

Our preaching of this text will not want to linger long on the specificities of Eli’s failure, or on the complicated history of priesthood leading to the triumph of Zadok, or on the dream theophany as a mode of disclosure. One must stay attentive to the larger theme, the legitimacy of Samuel and the beginning of a new social possibility for Israel *ex nihilo*. chapters 1–3 as a larger unit serve to authorize Samuel to take a fresh initiative in Israel’s life.

The narrative takes great care to show that Samuel’s credibility does not rest on any conventional political confirmation. Rather, Samuel is presented as having an authorization rooted in nothing other than the freedom and promise of God. Samuel’s freshly authorized voice in Israel’s public life stands over against all conventional modes of power and brusquely displaces them. Surely the old Israelites—and the storytellers—are political realists. They understand how political-priestly power works, how it is secured, maintained, and exercised. They want to assert, at the same time, a holy governance that matters in concrete life, a holy governance that is not bounded by accustomed power, by ordained authority, by conventional leadership. There is a chance for newness, and that chance is rooted in Hannah’s piety, in Israel’s daring doxology, in Eli’s yielding, in Samuel’s availability, in God’s resolve to do a new thing.

This narrative, in concert with Israel’s most profound faith, finds it credible to have God assert, “Behold, I am doing a new thing.” The narratives of Samuel want to assert that conviction, but they must do so in the midst of a difficult public crisis. God’s new thing is not a grand religious act but an invitation to a fresh, dangerous social beginning. All around the innocence of this narrative there were undoubtedly threats, bargains, and cunning calculations. In the midst of all those seductions, however, there is a season of naïveté when a young boy can receive a vision, an old man can embrace a relinquishment, a surprised mother can sing a song, the ears of the conventional can tingle, and life begins again. A new beginning means a terrible ending of some other arrangements. As we shall see, Samuel subsequently grows vexed and irascible about those endings, but not now, not here. This new beginning requires facing candidly all that has failed, and this narrative does that without flinching or deceiving.

First Samuel 2:11—4:1*a* invites a faithful simplicity about public possibility. What if the grasping political power and the harsh rapaciousness of religion were judged, condemned, and dismissed? What if old power were turned out and Israel were again young enough to dream? Samuel, as presented in these verses, is without vested interest. Unlike the sons of Eli, he would have no “bigger-than-regulation” fork with which to have more than his share (2:12–16). This narrative, by the power of a new disclosure from God, dares to believe and hope the community can begin again. Hard-nosed and sore-pressed Israel had a moment when they “knew” (3:20). They knew about Samuel and about the word, and therefore they knew about beginning again. In that knowing they found courage. They dared to believe that this God could act to “kill and make alive” (2:6). They watched in hope for the giving of new life. They knew also, as they watched Eli, about the coming of death. But they believed and hoped more powerfully than they grieved. They permitted their dream from God to override the sordid realities to which the old arrangements had disastrously led them.

I Samuel 4:1b—7:1

The Narrative of the Ark

These three chapters are commonly reckoned by scholars to be a coherent and distinctive narrative unit. They are conveniently referred to as “the ark narrative” because, apart from the powerful, invisible working of Yahweh, the ark is the only “character” who acts in the story. Miller and Roberts have effectively argued that the “hand” of Yahweh is the main theme. Attention to the “hand” gives a clue to the intent of the narrative when we remember that the “hand” is a way of speaking about *power*, the power of Yahweh. Of special interest is the fact that Samuel, for whom chapters 1–3 have so carefully prepared us, is not present in this narrative.

It is not necessary, however, to say that the ark has displaced Samuel as the central actor. Rather, this narrative witnesses to the direct will and action of Yahweh, for which the ark is simply a narrative vehicle. This narrative is theologically “primitive” in the sense that Yahweh acts directly, without recourse to any secondary agent. The task of interpretation will be to make this working of Yahweh dramatically available, without siphoning off the inscrutable and odd action of Yahweh into more cogent or “reasonable” forms. That is, the casting of the narrative does not invite us to an explanation of the action but to an awed silence before the one who is inexplicable, inscrutable, and finally irresistible.

I Samuel 4:1b–22

This narrative unit is divided into two parts, an account of two battles (vv. 1–11) and the report of the battle with a response to the report (vv. 12–22).

4:1b–11. The narrative begins abruptly with an engagement between Israel and the Philistines (v. 1). We know that Israel found the Philistines to be their most serious perennial adversary in the eleventh century, but the literature of Samuel has not given us any preparation for this conflict.

Everything in the Samuel narrative runs toward David. chapters 1–3 have introduced us to Samuel as the kingmaker. chapters 4–6, a quite distinct literary unit, begin in a fresh place to give us a second reason for the emergence of David, the Philistine emergency. The emergence of the kingmaker and the Philistine emergency prepares us for the narrative of kingship that is to follow.

In the report of the battle itself, we can identify three narrative elements. There is a pattern of defeat, ark, defeat. It is remarkable that in that sequence the ark in fact makes no difference. The defeat with the ark is even more devastating than the defeat without the ark. The effect of chapter 4 is to report the massive, complete defeat of Israel. The widow of Phinehas in the end surely has it right. The glory has departed: God is gone (v. 21). First, Israel is defeated (v. 2). We are not told why Israel is defeated. The defeat is simply reported. Second, the “ark of the covenant” is mobilized by Israel for a second effort against the Philistines (vv. 4–5). The ark is trusted by Israel as an emblem and embodiment of divine power, which will surely turn the battle in their favor. The first defeat (v. 2) is regarded in Israel as due to Yahweh’s absence, though we are not told that Yahweh was absent.

Now, in the third scene, Yahweh is to be fully present through the ark (vv. 6–11). Israel legitimately expects a different outcome to the conflict. As Israel trusts in the ark, so the Philistines fear it (v. 7). After such a dramatic buildup of trust and fear, however, Israel is again defeated. The ark is captured. The sons of Eli are killed. Eli’s sons were responsible for carrying the ark, so their death bespeaks a further failure of the ark. The dramatic problem of the narrative is that the ark made no positive difference in the outcome of the battle. Israel had lost without the ark; now Israel has lost with the ark. The second time, the loss is even more devastating (v. 10).

The account of the battle (as is usual in Israel’s narrative), however, is not simply a report. Rather, the account is organized around two reflective speeches, one by the elders of Israel (v. 3) and the other by the Philistines (vv. 6–9). Both speeches are intensely Yahwistic: that is, they do not concern strategy and logistics of battle but perceive the conflict as a question about the reality of God. Israel’s comment on the defeat is a serious question about why Yahweh caused the defeat. It never occurred to Israel, so the narrator suggests, to doubt Yahweh or to imagine that Yahweh was overpowered or outfought by the Philistine gods. Such a possibility lies outside the dramatic horizon of the narrative.

The answer to Israel's question is the resolve to mobilize the ark. The suggested (but unspoken) answer to the question of defeat is that Yahweh was not fully present; that is why there was defeat. Moreover, the absence and ineffectiveness is not blamed on Yahweh. The defeat does not raise issues of God's fidelity. Israel is simply neglectful in not properly attending to the ark. Now, however, the ark, symbol and embodiment of Yahweh's warlike solidarity with Israel, is confidently brought into play (v. 5). The narrative and Israel have a right to expect a very different outcome this second time.

With the ark come Israel's eager enthusiasm and confidence and the release of Israel's old primitive energies for war (v. 5). The Philistines hear and wonder (v. 6). The narrator dares to give voice to the enemy reaction. Such narrative style indicates that we are dealing with a well-crafted and sophisticated literature. The story leads us in imagination to participate in the Philistine dread of Yahweh. Yahweh, and the response of Israel, caused great fear among the Philistines. The Philistines recognized the sounds in Israel's camp as the sounds of a dangerous, dreadful God (v. 7). The Philistines do not know the name of that God, but they sense the power now present in Israel and against them. Israelite storytelling wants and expects the Philistines to quake before Yahweh. The narrator accentuates what an odd, freighted moment this is, as the Philistines say with dread, "This never happened to us before" (v. 7).

Indeed, this terrible threat of the direct, assaulting intervention of God has happened only once before in the life of Israel. Remarkably, the Philistines draw the analogy and recognize that this situation is singularly parallel to the great paradigmatic defeat of the Egyptians (v. 8). This is like the Exodus! And we all know what happened to the Egyptians! The Philistines are presented as superb interpreters of the history and faith of Israel. They are perfectly capable of articulating a "dynamic analogy" in Israel's faith. Even these uncircumcised outsiders can discern the strange power at work in the life of Israel, a strange power enormously dangerous to, and recognized as such by, the outsider. The narrative employs the perception of the Philistine to confess faith in Yahweh (Timm).

How strange that the recognition of the similarity to the Exodus does not lead the Philistines to collapse, surrender, submit, or pray. It causes them, instead, to have courage and to act bravely (v. 9). And the Philistines win a second time! Something has gone haywire for Israel. The dramatic

power of “holy war” ideology which was expected to energize Israel has in fact emboldened the Philistines. Even the ark, in which Israel placed its trust and before which the Philistines trembled in dread, could not deliver Israel.

Nonetheless, we are given no explanation. It is as though the narrator has no theological curiosity. We might want to ask about Yahweh’s power or fidelity, but the story raises no such explicit questions. As we shall see, that is not because the narrator does not care but because a closely disciplined narrative strategy is being employed. The narrative is permitted to have its own dramatic say without excessive explanation. The turn of events nullifies Israel’s conventional confidence and contradicts the enormous fear of the Philistines. The result of the second battle shows that Israel’s trust and the Philistines’ fear have been misplaced (vv. 10–11). Clearly the defeat can no longer be understood as due to Yahweh’s absence, for Yahweh is now present in the ark. Rather, the defeat can be understood only as the will of Yahweh. That recognition creates a much more urgent theological crisis in Israel.

4:12–22. The outcome of the battle is now reported. Verses 12–22 narrate two crucial, pained responses to the news of Israel’s defeat. First, the messenger must come and bring the news to Eli (vv. 12–18). There must be a telling, and death, and grief (v. 13). Eli and Israel know the cause of the defeat. It is Yahweh’s response to Israel’s disobedience. Israel knows it is now undone, because Yahweh has abandoned it to the Philistines. For the purposes of the narrative, Eli must be told separately and in great detail (vv. 14–17). The messenger spares nothing: “a great slaughter ... your sons are dead ... the ark is captured.”

Eli’s reaction to the defeat, though briefly narrated, has a quality of tragic nobility (v. 18). Perhaps he had anticipated the loss, because he had already heard Yahweh’s decree in the mouth of Samuel (3:11–14). That verdict, however, had concerned only his sons. Here Eli’s response of grief and pathos does not concern his sons but the ark. It is the ark that matters, the ark for which Eli had given his life; the ark embodied the faithful presence of Yahweh. Eli had staked his life and his faith on the power of the ark and the God who sojourned with it. Now the ark is gone, and with it Eli’s pure conviction about the presence and fidelity of Yahweh. If the ark has failed, Yahweh is absent and Israel is bereft. The conclusion is more

than the old man can countenance. Eli dies, not with regret about his sons, who are not even mentioned, but with anguish about Yahweh's way with Israel. Now everything is forfeited!

The verdict had been given on his sons (2:30–31; 3:11–14). The sweep of judgment now, however, has become much larger. It has caught the entire people of Israel, the people whom Eli served and cared for. The narrative is wondrously terse and disciplined. There is no reason given for the defeat, no reflection, no indictment. The outcome of defeat and devastation is left to make its own statement. The end has come; Eli is dead; the old order has failed, and Israel must face humiliation. Indeed, there is something here even of the humiliation of Yahweh, for whom Eli cares the most.

However, the second part of the battle report is the most pathos-filled (vv. 19–22). The daughter-in-law of Eli, the wife of Phinehas, is pregnant. The devastating news of loss, defeat, and death brings the baby. As the baby is born, the mother dies (v. 20).

The unnamed daughter-in-law has just borne a new life. This fragile offer of life, however, is as nothing contrasted to the heavy loss of Israel. Even in childbirth, this woman focuses, as Israel always must do, on its public life and on its God. She appropriately named the child “Ichabod,” or “Where is the Glory (*kabod*),” for, as she observed, “the glory has departed” (vv. 21–22). She understands so much so well. “The glory” could refer to the prowess, prestige, and “life force” of Israel, which is now clearly absent. But more likely it refers to God in all God's sovereign splendor and power (cf. I Sam. 15:29, where “Glory of Israel” clearly is Yahweh).

God is gone. God has left, driven into exile (*golah*, v. 21). When God leaves, Israel is utterly bereft, as bereft as Hannah when left alone. Israel is now helpless in the face of any adversary, and certainly against the Philistines. The narrative has held off interpretive theological comment until this final moment. Now the only interpretive comment is in the mouth of this unnamed, most discerning woman. God is absent. That is why Israel has lost. That is why the ark is captured. That is why the Philistines have won. God is gone, no longer Israel's strong defense and sure ally. The woman notes the incongruity. The ark is still present. But the one so long and so intimately associated with the ark is not present. Either in weakness—perhaps Yahweh could not resist the Philistines—or in freedom—perhaps God chose not to stay with Israel in battle—we know not which, God is not

now powerfully and reliably attached to the ark. The ark no longer guarantees Israel's salvation in situations of crisis.

The narrative of chapter 4 dramatically empties Israel's central symbol of reliable power and authority. Israel's "presumed world" has failed, and even the despised Philistines can see the failure. Israel may not be without God's power, but Israel no longer has the cultic means to mandate, harness, or commandeer that power. Israel must face a new danger and has become more vulnerable and without certitude. Israel has no categories for understanding its new situation.

But, as we shall see, the Philistines understand even less than does Israel. The Philistines are still committed to a false god, which leads to a false perception of power and possibility in history. The Philistines conclude too easily that Yahweh is now in their power. They completely misunderstand the character of Yahweh's power and the depth of Yahweh's commitment to Israel. The Philistines underestimate the free and unexpected ways in which Yahweh can assert power. At this moment in the narrative, the Philistines and the Israelites share this misunderstanding. Both draw the conclusion that Yahweh has been defeated. Only the narrator knows otherwise.

The Philistines are present in the narrative as the ones who read the battle with Israel through the Exodus paradigm. Among the appeals to the Exodus narrative (which may or may not be intentional), Israel "cries out" in its affliction (v. 13; cf. Ex. 2:23). Israel is routed by the enemy (v. 3) as Egypt was routed by Yahweh (Ex. 14:27, albeit with a different word). As Yahweh resolved to "get glory over Pharaoh" (Ex. 14:4, 17), so now the glory is defeated and departs, humiliated, into exile (vv. 21–22). In the first case the allusion to the Exodus is parallel; in the other two the allusion is inverted so that Yahweh is not a triumphant and liberating God, as in the Exodus, but is defeated and humiliated. This is Exodus in reverse (Moran). Israel is not a rescued people, as in the Exodus, but a people defeated and subjected to further oppression. The Exodus model helps us see how intolerable is the new situation of Yahweh and of Israel. Yahweh is seen to be weak. And a weak Yahweh means that Israel is fated for more oppression.

I Samuel 5:1–12

chapter 4 cannot be taken by itself in our interpretation. It is only the first episode in the extended dramatic narrative of the ark (chs. 4–6). chapter 5, the middle piece in the ark narrative, contains the decisive inversion that is at the heart of the entire narrative. At the beginning of this chapter, Yahweh and the ark are captured and are therefore weak; the Philistines and their god, Dagon, are strong and have prevailed (v. 1). By the end of this chapter, Yahweh’s “hand” (power) prevails (v. 11) and the Philistines are reduced to a helpless cry (v. 12). chapter 5 is the story of the humiliated one being exalted, the exalted one being humiliated. Or, with the song of Hannah (2:6–7), this is the story of the God who kills and brings to life, who brings down and raises up, who makes poor and makes rich, who brings low and exalts.

chapter 5 is the narrative presentation of the inscrutable but irresistible way in which this God of Israel, driven into exile and captured (4:21–22), cannot be kept helpless but will act according to Yahweh’s proper and unequalled freedom and sovereign power. This reversal can be offered only in narrative form. The narrative form completely and deliberately hides from us any reflective explanation. The only ground for understanding the reversal is to discern the distinctive character of Yahweh, who comes to new freedom, power, and life *ex nihilo*, with no reason outside Yahweh’s own incomparable person. In this story, Israel discerns the one who comes to new life and is prepared to trust the one who works life out of death. Israel, in telling this remarkable inversion, has no alternative to a narrative mode. This is the way Israel must speak, even as the church can only narrate the resurrection of Jesus. Israel cannot reason, explain, or understand. It can only bear witness and rehearse the peculiar reversal and triumph.

5:1–5. The opening scene is in the temple of Dagon (the Philistine god) in Ashdod, the Philistine city. The captured ark has been taken there and set next to the statue of Dagon. The exhibit of the ark was no doubt a proud trophy of victory for Dagon and has several functions. First, placing the ark next to Dagon shows a dramatic submission of Yahweh to Dagon. The ark is physically subsumed into the temple, leaving no question as to whom the Philistines understood to be the most powerful god. We can only conclude that Dagon has triumphed. Second, if the Philistines thought that Yahweh still had some power, this act also served to ally that residue of power with

their own god. The action of verses 1–2 makes clear that Yahweh has been defeated and must now function in the arena of Dagon’s alien power and legitimacy—or so the Philistines assume.

The Philistines, however, have failed to reckon with the peculiar character and power of Yahweh. They have not adequately understood Yahweh’s first two commandments (Ex. 20.3–6). They do not understand that a god like Dagon, who is a graven image, has no real power and is no match for Yahweh. They do not understand Yahweh’s surging power and freedom. Thus even the capture of the ark, precious symbol that it is, entails no real curtailment of Yahweh’s actual power.

In the first morning after the capture, the Philistines find Dagon face down before the ark (v. 3). Either Dagon has been struck down or Dagon has recognized Yahweh’s sovereignty and has bowed down. The story is not troubled by the capability of a statue to commit an act of submission. The narrative concerns a theological inversion and does not linger over questions of religious artifacts.

The second day the drama intensifies. Dagon had been propped up again, as even powerful religious statues must be (cf. Isa. 46:6–7). The Philistine god is an empty artifact and must receive support from the Philistines. Nonetheless, the Philistines find Dagon again face down before the ark (v. 4). The fake god who has been propped up is knocked down by the God who has real power. This time Dagon has lost his head and his hands. Klein says neatly (p. 50) that Dagon is “without a head for thinking or hands for acting.” Dagon has been robbed of power to act and emptied of the dignity proper to a god. In a word, Dagon has been dethroned. The presumed power of Dagon, which seemed so real after the routing of Israel, is exposed as null. Yahweh, who was presumed defeated, acts inscrutably to dominate even this foreign temple. Yahweh has in fact preempted the alien temple of Dagon so that it now belongs to Yahweh and is an arena of Yahweh’s sovereignty.

The phrase “They rose early on the next morning” (v. 4) calls to mind the Easter formula of the Gospels (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1). Like those women in the Gospel narrative, the Philistines came to the temple “early the next morning” expecting to find a triumphant Dagon and a defeated Yahweh. In the Gospel they came expecting to find the power of death regnant and the defeat of Jesus. In neither case did the morning visitors find what they expected.

The expectation of both the Philistines and the women in the Gospel failed to recognize that the power for life belongs to Yahweh, power for life which neither Dagon nor death could finally administer. Notice in what an understated way the point is made in our narrative. The listener is left to draw her own conclusion. The ark may be captured, but the glory of Yahweh is not as fully departed or exiled as Eli's daughter-in-law had concluded. After the dramatic exile and capture, there is still more of Yahweh's sovereignty with which the Philistines must reckon.

5:6–10. The God who has again come to power now terrorizes the Philistines. In the arena of real political and military power, such sovereign action of Yahweh is astonishing. The Philistines, ostensibly, are the politically powerful ones with advanced technology who expect to prevail. Indeed, Israel expects the Philistines to prevail. How odd it is, in the face of that expectation, that Yahweh, who sojourns with the pitiful peasants of Israel, can terrorize this formidable Philistine community. The power of Yahweh manifested in the narrative is not what we expect, given the political realities of Israel and the Philistines.

Yahweh, however, does not conform to such a reading of reality. The God of Israel does not simply reflect the people. Israel has no power to bestow on Yahweh. Indeed, it is precisely in the midst of Israel's pitiful powerlessness, against both the weakness of Israel and the power of Philistine, that Yahweh has come again to power. This narrative concerns not simply the posturing of two peoples, one proud and powerful, the other pitiful and poor. Rather, it concerns a theological assertion of power that has no ground or explanation outside Yahweh's own person. Yahweh is not explained by the character of Israel but acts freely and against the conventions of both peoples.

The sociological surprise of the narrative is matched by a stunning theological disclosure. Dagon had lost his hands—that is, his power (v. 4). In verse 6 Yahweh is the one with the “strong hand.” The inversion is complete. The “strong hand” of Yahweh had caused the initial Exodus (Deut. 26:8), and now this same “hand” (power) is “heavy” against Ashdod. The word “heavy” is from the same root as the word rendered “glory” in 4:21–22. Thus verse 6 asserts that Yahweh still has glory—not defeated and not impotent. The hand which judges and saves is not shortened but is filled with power (cf. Isa. 50:2; 59:1). This hand which saves also judges. The

heavy hand of Yahweh sends “tumors” among the Philistines (v. 6). The exact character of the “tumors” is problematic. All the story needs is recognition that the tumors are a bodily affliction (reminiscent of the Egyptian plagues) that causes enormous alarm among the Philistines. The plague reaches epidemic proportions. The Philistines have no doubt of Yahweh’s power or of the helplessness of Dagon, who is “without hands.”

Unlike Dagon without hands, Yahweh has God’s own hands and with those hands will judge and destroy in ways that astonish God’s people and terrorize God’s enemies. The role of the Philistines is carefully articulated in chapters 4 and 5. They are the ones who discern the power and sovereignty of Yahweh. They unwittingly observe and testify that Yahweh is indeed God. They interpret what is going on in the categories of Israel’s faith. In 4:8 it is the Philistines who introduce the Exodus analogy. Now it is the Philistines who see that Yahweh’s “hand is heavy,” that Yahweh’s power is strong, and that Dagon is helpless (v. 7). The Philistines no longer engage in religious drama or in political strategy. Their single aim is to remove the threat. The narrative mocks the Philistines, because they act only to save their city, no longer to control Israel. Their care in getting rid of the ark is like the care exercised in defusing a bomb that might explode at any time.

Once the hand of Yahweh is on the move, the narrative unfolds in ways reminiscent of the dramatic repetition of the plague cycle of Exodus 6–11. The drama of affliction and expulsion is played out first in Ashdod, where the seeming triumph of Dagon was previously enacted (vv. 6–8). In verse 9 the same drama is played out in Gath, a second city where again the hand of Yahweh is heavy. In verse 10 the same action ensues as the ark is brought to the third city, Ekron. The God of Israel has completely routed the Philistines. There is no appeal to Dagon. The Philistine god is clearly helpless and irrelevant in the face of Yahweh, the God of the Exodus. Yahweh is now enthroned in the ark in full power, full power recognized even by the Philistines. The strategy of the Philistines in moving the ark from city to city is not unlike the desperate negotiations between Caiaphas and Pilate concerning Jesus (John 18:13—19: 16) or frantic negotiations to see where to dump our nuclear waste. The waste is exceedingly dangerous. Everyone agrees about that, and everyone believes it should be dumped somewhere far away. The Philistines are agreed that Yahweh is exceedingly dangerous, and the ark should be placed somewhere far away.

5:11–12. The individual assaults Yahweh makes on Philistine cities produces a general consultation among the Philistine rulers. It is clear to them (and to us as listeners) that the Philistines have neither resource nor recourse against Yahweh. They draw the only possible conclusion: “Send away the ark of the God of Israel and let it return to its own place” (v. 11). This is an astonishing acknowledgment by the Philistines, ostensibly non-believers, that the God of Israel has prevailed. The hand of Yahweh is heavy. Again the term “heavy” is *kabod*. This God has indeed “gotten glory” over the Philistines and over Dagon, as it was earlier gotten over Egypt and Pharaoh.

In contrast to this God who now rules in glory, the Philistines are reduced to “deathly panic,” “stricken,” reduced to a “cry.” At the outset, Israel had cried in its loss (4:13). That is all changed; now the Philistines, who seemed for an instant to prevail, are defeated. The “cry” of the city of Shiloh (4:13) is displaced by a Philistine cry (5:12). The cry of the Philistines is a replica of the strickenness of Egypt: “And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever shall be again” (Ex. 11:6).

It may be that the cry of Pharaoh is so massive that there would never be a cry like it again, but the Philistines come a close second. They also are defeated, humiliated, and placed in jeopardy by the power of Yahweh. Yahweh is again free and on the move. The early church will confess that the power of death could not hold Jesus (Acts 2:24). Already here the narrator of I Samuel discerned that the power of Dagon and the Philistines could not hold Yahweh for Israel. Yahweh is on the loose: free, sovereign, about to do a new thing. The Philistines cannot stop this God from doing the new thing for which Israel so desperately waits.

I Samuel 6:1—7:1

The decisive victory over the Philistines has been won. chapter 6 offers continuing evidence of the power of Yahweh and, correspondingly, the panic-induced respect of the Philistines.

6:1–3. The Philistines know they must rid themselves of the ark. They must get free of the awesome threat of Yahweh if they are to live. Only now, in verse 2, the issue has escalated from 5:11. The issue is not simply to return

the ark to its place; now the Philistines ask, “With what?” What is appropriate and adequate to accompany the ark as a gesture of deference? The ark cannot be sent back empty. Daube has seen that as slaves cannot be sent away empty-handed (Deut. 15:13), as Israel could not leave Egypt empty-handed (Ex. 11:2), so the ark of Yahweh must not go empty-handed. As a sign of serious respect, Yahweh and the ark must go with a tribute befitting the dignity and recent victory of Yahweh.

The Philistines recognize that the gift must be of considerable worth to counteract the threat of Yahweh’s rage unloosed against them. They have made a terrible miscalculation in underestimating Yahweh’s enormous power and sovereign freedom. Now a ritual act must be performed to compensate for that fearful affront. The Philistines must take care not to commit a second miscalculation. The offering is necessary to “turn away the hand” that has been so devastating (v. 3).

6:4–9. These verses contain a long discussion by the Philistines about the appropriate offering. It is quickly determined that the accompanying gift (guilt offering) is to be five golden tumors and five golden mice (vv. 4–5a). The offering is carefully calculated. It is gold, because to be worthy the gift must be something of value. The preoccupation with gold echoes Israel’s early taking of gold and silver (Ex. 11:2), thus providing another allusion to the Exodus narrative. The number five bespeaks the totality of the five Philistine cities (cf. vv. 17–18), indicating the respect, capitulation, and submission of all of the Philistines. The gift of “tumors and mice” is an intention to “give back” the plagues caused by Yahweh and so remove their danger from Philistine cities. Thus the gift articulates worth (gold), submission (five), and eradication (tumors). The ark is both a vehicle for Yahweh and a vehicle for the offering. The Philistines make certain that Yahweh is properly honored—or appeased.

The cart to transport the ark (and Yahweh) and the offering is to be self-guided (v. 9). It is to go of its own will. Yahweh is to be a self-starter, something Dagon could not conceivably have done (cf. Isa. 46:1–4 on the contrast between Yahweh the self-starter and the gods who have no propulsion). The cart and the cows that pull it are previously unused and so are appropriate to this “holy mission.”

There may be an element of cunning in the Philistine arrangement. If the cart does not head back to Israel of its own volition, led only by

Yahweh's power, the alleged and dreaded power of Yahweh may be a ruse and the Philistines need not fear. The Philistines defer, but they have also arranged a test to determine if Yahweh is indeed a self-starter.

The Philistines may imagine that Yahweh is no more capable of this extraordinary initiative than is their god Dagon, who could never propel a cart anywhere. Moreover, this final test of Yahweh's free initiative is intensified and made more difficult by the Philistines, because the cows that draw the cart, presumably in obedience to Yahweh, must leave their calves (v. 7). The test thus requires Yahweh to preempt the more "natural" attachment of the cows to their calves and lead them away from their calves toward Israel. The planning of the Philistines is indeed careful and cunning and sets very long odds, the same long odds Yahweh (and Elijah) faced at Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:33–38). The Philistines are frightened, but they still hope to see Yahweh exposed as a powerless god. Their strategy is to prevent Yahweh's demonstration of sovereignty.

What interests us most in this extended Philistine speech is the theological reflection in verses 5–6. The golden tumors and mice are to "give glory" to Yahweh, the God of Israel (v. 5). The same God who seemed to have lost glory (4:21–22) is now to be honored and made heavy by Philistine deference. The hope is that if this God is *heavy*, that same God will have a sovereign hand which is *light*. The play on the theme "heavy–light" is quite deliberate (v. 5). One more time the motif of Yahweh's "hand" (power) is made central to the story. Moreover, at the end of verse 5, the triad "you, your gods, your land" recognizes how massive Yahweh's power is. Yahweh rules everything that is Philistine, in their heaven as well as on their earth. Dagon has dramatically disappeared as a crucial actor in the narrative, having been nullified in chapter 5 by the irresistible power of Yahweh. The reference to "give glory" once again connects this narrative to that of Exodus (14:4, 17).

The connection with the Exodus narrative is made explicit in verse 6 with the direct reference to Pharaoh. It is remembered (even by the Philistines) that Pharaoh hardened his heart. The hardening was a refusal to let Israel go, when that was Yahweh's intention. Instead of submitting and cooperating, Pharaoh resisted. Our narrative need not even reiterate how much trouble Pharaoh brought on himself and his realm by his stubborn refusal to let Israel go. Clearly all of that trouble could have been averted had Pharaoh submitted. The discourse is an argument that the Philistines

should not replicate the terrible destructiveness Pharaoh brought on himself by his refusal. This appeal to the Exodus memory is made to buttress the argument that Yahweh and the ark should be let go. Clearly in the “letting go” of Yahweh and the ark, the Philistines are also letting the Israelites go, for this act tacitly admits that the Israelites are no longer subject to Philistine control. In the end the Philistines are eager to have Yahweh leave, even as Pharaoh finally was anxious for Israel’s departure (Ex. 12:31–33). As Pharaoh must “let my people go,” the Philistines must let Yahweh go.

The Philistine argument in verses 5*b*–6 provides the interpretive clue to the long ark narrative of chapters 4–6. Chapter 6:5*b*–6 is a counterpart to 4:7–8. Together they link our entire narrative (4:1—7:1) to the Exodus memory. The first speech has the Philistines recognize that the situation is like that of the Exodus (4:7–8). This recognition by the Philistines initially leads to “courage” on their part (4:9). The analogy, however, eventually requires not courage but submission; the Philistines do submit to Yahweh (6:5–6). They do not harden their hearts. They do not prevent the departure of Yahweh. They do not “make sport” with Yahweh but deal in fearful respect. Everything is now ready for Yahweh’s departure: the preparation of gifts (vv. 4–5*a*), the recognition of the analogy of the Exodus (vv. 5*b*–6), and the preparation of transport (vv. 7–9). There is dramatic suspense, waiting to see if the scheme will work, waiting to see if Yahweh will leave, waiting to see if there will be an exodus, waiting to see if Yahweh can make a move to liberation.

6:10–16. These verses provide the narrative conclusion. “And the cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh ... they turned neither to the right nor to the left” (v. 12). Yahweh is on the way home! This is an exodus! Yahweh returns in glory, having yet again defeated an oppressive enemy of Israel. The journey of the ark has two audiences. The Philistines carefully monitor the journey to make sure Yahweh moves well beyond their boundaries (vv. 12*b*, 16). The Israelites who are along the road also watch. And they know! They know Yahweh has returned in power. They rejoice (v. 13); assisted by the Levites, they offer sacrifices in celebration (vv. 14–16). It was probably a modest procession—one cart, two cows, one ark, one God. In the world of this narrative, however, this seemingly simple procession is the return of a mighty God in triumph, the very God who seemed for a time to have been defeated and robbed of power.

Whatever the historical modesty of the event, liturgically the happening anticipates the great lyrical poetry of another return from exile:

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together.
Isaiah 40:4–5

This is the coming of the glory that Dagon could not defeat. This is a homecoming from exile, for the glory had been exiled (see the word “exile” [*golah*] in 4:21–22). The entire event bespeaks Yahweh’s sovereign way in the world. In our text Yahweh has said nothing, decreed, asserted, required nothing. Yahweh has moved in total, astonishing silence. There is no doubt, however, either for Israel or for the Philistines, that the sovereign will of Yahweh dominates the story. No one speaks in the narrative except the Philistines. Yahweh’s action nonetheless majestically overrides their speech. All flesh see it, and Israel rejoices.

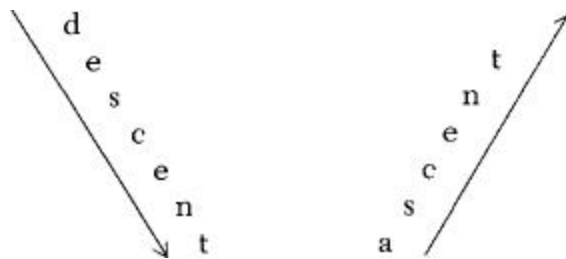
6:17—7:1. After the return of the ark, the narrative moves quickly to its conclusion. A summary statement is made to indicate that all the Philistines have submitted to Yahweh (vv. 17–18*a*). None withhold tribute. The decisive victory of Yahweh is confirmed with reference to a “great stone” which bears witness to the remarkable inversion wrought by Yahweh (v. 18*b*). The ark is provisionally housed in Kiriath-jearim in the house of Abinadab (6:19—7:1). There it will remain twenty years, presumably dormant, until David finds a “use” for it (II Sam. 6:1–5).

The narrative includes one last warning (v. 19; cf. II Sam. 6:6–11). Some Israelites violate the ark, either by looking in it (v. 19) or by refusing to celebrate (so the Septuagint). The response of Yahweh is to strike out and kill them. This small episode puts Israel on notice that Yahweh is no more easily at home in Israel than in Philistia. As the Philistines found the ark dangerous, so the Israelites must take heed and not presume upon it or upon Yahweh. The holiness of the ark and the restless glory of Yahweh permit none to draw too close, either Philistine or Israelite.

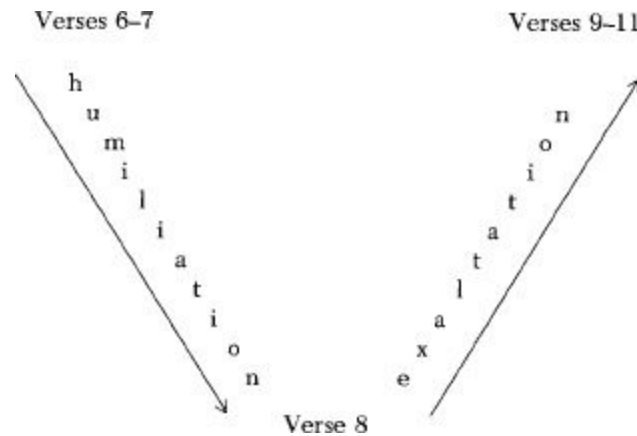
The ark narrative is remarkable for its primitive theological substance, in which there is hand-to-hand, face-to-face combat between the gods. The

battle is not done by agents or by human actors but by the gods themselves. The primitive theological substance is matched by its mode of articulation. The most crucial things are left unsaid in this disciplined, elusive portrayal. We are not told how Yahweh defeated Dagon or how the cart was led back to Israel; the narrator seems uninterested in such details. Moreover, the narrative is not in fact much interested in the ark, a point well made by Miller and Roberts. The narrative seems to care principally for the status and destiny of Yahweh, for the defeat and then the power of Yahweh.

Theological interpretation might best focus on the structure of the extended narrative of chapters 4–6, which may be characterized as the presentation of the “humiliation and exaltation” of Yahweh. chapter 4 concerns the exile of God’s glory, and chapter 6 concerns Yahweh’s return in newly recognized glory. Between these two statements stands chapter 5 within the inscrutable but unmistakable defeat of Dagon by Yahweh. That structure of is expressed as “glory departed” (4:21–22) and “glory given” (6:5). The narrative moves from the “outcry” of Israel (4:14) to the “rejoicing” of Israel (6:13), from Yahweh’s departure into captivity (4:21–22; 5:1) to Yahweh’s triumphant return in splendor (6:12–13). The two speeches of the Philistines (4:7–9; 6:4–9) lay the Exodus model over the present events, so that the story concerns Yahweh’s departure into bondage and emancipation from bondage, not unlike Israel from Egypt.



The structure of this extended narrative is replicated in the hymn of verses 5–11 in Philippians 2, which also moves in a sequence of descent and ascent:



What is striking in the ark narrative is the “humiliation” of Yahweh at the hands of Dagon. That humiliation, however, is powerfully and inscrutably inverted. The same inversion is central to Pauline Christology.

The theme of bondage and emancipation, of humiliation and exaltation, permits a delicate and critical articulation of God through this narrative. This God is neither a common contestant in the ongoing struggle among the gods nor a god who is immune to or above the struggle of the gods. Rather, this is a God whose power appears to the world (the Philistines) as foolishness (cf. I Cor. 1:18–25). We may wonder why it is that Yahweh and Israel were routed in chapter 4. No hint of an answer is given. It may well be that the narrator had to face the hard, uncompromising reality of fact—there was a defeat of Israel and of Yahweh. No doubt there was. Two days later, however, Yahweh mobilizes power to nullify Dagon. That decisive show of power is as inexplicable as the initial defeat. Both the initial defeat and the decisive show of power are crucial for a faithful discernment of God.

The wonder of the narrative, demanding astonishment and not explanation, comes after the defeat. How is it, or why is it, that the God who suffers defeat is able to “arise,” to take initiative, and come home in glory? How is it that the same God who is able to take such powerful initiative is submitted to the humiliation of the Philistine capture? And having submitted, whence comes power to begin again? Israel does not know the answers to these questions, does not explain, does not speculate. Israel simply narrates these “marvelous things” which have come to pass. Israel’s narrative, moreover, is so compelling that it manages to draw even the Philistines into the narrative with important speaking parts. The speaking parts of the Philistines function to advance an Israelite-Yahwistic

interpretation of events. The Philistines are, in the end, cast as partisans of Yahweh.

Proclamation of this text concerns the character of God and the life of the community with this God. This two-stage reality of humiliation and exaltation, of bondage and freedom, of death and new life, and of obvious weakness and amazing power belongs to the nature of this God and of life with this God. The narrative asserts that there is tribulation in the world, for Israel and for God. It dares to assert that Israel may “be of good cheer,” because the tribulation has been overcome (cf. John 16:33). This narrative is testimony to a God who enters fully into the dangers of historical reality and who, in the midst of Israel’s life, works inexplicable newness, newness grounded in (and understood with reference to) nothing other than the reality of God.

This story is for and to Israelites, a story to which the Philistines have no access—either in the telling or in the hearing. This story is testimony in Israel from generation to generation. It asserts that this history of Israel with Yahweh is a very peculiar history. In the midst of alien gods (all the way from Egyptian to Babylonian gods), in the midst of alien political power and alien cultural temptation, Israel’s life is visited by this God who is beyond explanation. The ark narrative functions for Israel as an offer of hope; this self-starting God can work a newness in the face of every seeming defeat. Given such testimony, Israel can tolerate the long odds of faith and not capitulate to the surrounding powers.

This narrative is not different in kind from the strange inversions that cluster in the accounts of Jesus. The church community is always going “early in the next morning” (cf. 5:4), expecting to find things as they were the night before. Never fully comprehending this God, the church blandly expects the dead to stay dead and the blind, lame, lepers, and poor all to remain as they were (cf. Luke 7:22–23). This story is congenial to the startling evangelical announcement that “He is not here, he has risen.” In the hiddenness of the night, in the dangerous presence of death, Yahweh’s power for life has been unleashed. Nothing has stayed the same. All the Dagon of death have lost their grip. In their place has come Yahweh’s power for life—sight, well-being, cleansing, justice. The rejoicing of Easter is like the joy in the fields of Beth-shemesh (6:13). All flesh sees the newness. The community does not speculate or explain, it simply notices

and tells and dances and risks the newness. That is what the Philistines found the next morning: “He is not here.” Only his ark remains in captivity.

The repeated phrase “hand of Yahweh” affirms to us that Yahweh has a distinctive “hand” (power) that is not dependent upon or derived from human action or intention. The originary power of Yahweh in this narrative overrides our embarrassed modernity, which assumes that “God has no hands but our hands.” That slogan contains the desperate conclusion that God does not and cannot act in the world in free sovereignty. It is this cowardly modernity that leads us to exhaustion and despair. The narrative, however, will have none of such a capitulation, because it portrays an inversion not subject to such explained, controlled categories.

The inversion in this narrative, so characteristic of unembarrassed Yahwism, may break our dread density of despair. We may watch Yahweh’s departure from Philistia and share in the exodus. We may even sing on the way home and offer offerings. The mystery is to be received and enacted, not investigated.

Thus far we have dealt with two large narrative units, chapters 1–3 on the legitimacy of Samuel and 4–6 on the power of Yahweh. Except for the appearance of Eli’s family in both, the two clusters of narrative seem not related to each other. These two clusters, both built up of lesser traditional pieces, provide the foundational elements for the story of kingship now to follow. chapters 1–3 concern an inversion from barrenness to birth. God works a wonder out of which comes this leader who is freshly a custodian and bearer of God’s governing word. chapters 4–6 concern an inversion in which the defeated God comes home in glory. In both narratives this God has capacity to act against present arrangements, against conventions, against the facts, against business as usual. The stories are astonished at Yahweh’s newness, evident in Samuel, in the ark, in Israel. At the end of chapter 6, Israel still waits. In retrospect Israel is waiting for David. In the precise moment of this narrative, however, Israel waits only in hope, not doubting Yahweh can work a newness beyond the expectations of Eli or Dagon or even Hannah. Thus far we have seen glimpses of this God who gives life beyond our timid boundaries and our fearful expectations. There is, however, more to be told.

I Samuel 7:2–17

Samuel as Judge

Samuel has been authorized (3:19–21), and Yahweh (through the ark) has prevailed (6:12–13). Samuel and the ark together embody what was authoritative and binding in the old covenant faith of Moses. The world of I Samuel 1–7 is organized as a theocracy. There is one God (Yahweh), and Samuel is the single authorized mediator of that single God. The lines of authority and the patterns for well-being are clear, effective, and accepted as valid. The community of Israel has staked its life on these traditional categories. It looks to Samuel as the faithful guardian and effective enactor of the tradition. Samuel's power is that he so obviously and vigorously embodies what is best in that old tradition.

7:2–4. Samuel abruptly and decisively reappears in the narrative. It is probable that verse 3 begins a quite new piece of literature. Nevertheless, we may identify a connection between this unit and the ark narrative. The old tradition of covenantal faith believed that well-being depends on covenantal obedience. Obedience leads to blessing from Yahweh, disobedience to curse. The terrible defeat of chapter 4 is not explained, but it is plausible to conclude that the defeat occurred because Eli's sons (and Israel) had not obeyed.

Samuel and Israel make a new beginning (v. 3). Samuel assumes the central role for which he is prepared in chapters 1–3, a role not unlike that of Moses. Verse 3 is a model and summary of the old covenantal faith now placed on the lips of Samuel. Israel is freshly constituted as a people in covenant and now summoned to obey the commands of Yahweh. Clearly the primary and most important command is “No other gods.” Israel responds by “putting away” the other gods that had jeopardized its life with Yahweh (v. 4; cf. Josh. 24:14–15).

Samuel urges Israel to return to Yahweh with all its heart (v. 3). The heart is the organ of commitment and loyalty (Wolff 1974, pp. 51–55). Samuel echoes the normative summons of Moses (Deut. 6:4–5). Israel is to have a single heart, a single loyalty devoted only to Yahweh. When Israel's

heart (loyalty) turns from Yahweh to any other loyalty, trouble and death will surely come (cf. I Kings 11:2–4).

This central affirmation is the core claim of Mosaic covenantal faith. This summons requires that Israel look only to Yahweh in every need and in every circumstance. In Samuel's time, in the face of the Philistine threat, in the face of Canaanite culture, in the presence of Canaanite religion, Israel began to notice other loyalties that seemed more promising. Israel began to mix its faith and its loyalty with other loyalties and alternatives seemingly more attractive, more compelling, and more productive. Israel is tempted, again and again, to change its central loyalty and, with it, to change its mode of ethics and its patterns of social relationships. Samuel is summoned by Yahweh to call Israel back to its primary loyalty, to its single reliance, and to shun other modes of life, security, and well-being. The demand of Samuel is that Israel belong only to Yahweh and not be permitted any other loyalty. The promise of Samuel is that Yahweh is completely adequate as a delivering God, who can work rescue in any circumstance, even with the Philistines. Samuel bears witness to the adequacy of Yahweh, even as he bears witness to the sovereignty of Yahweh.

The summons of Samuel echoes the initial summons of Moses to Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:5–6) and the summons of Joshua to Israel at Shechem (Josh. 24:14–15). Israel must choose. Israel must always decide again about Yahweh and Yahweh's way in the world. Israel must always decide again for covenant and against other modes of peace and prosperity, which covenantal faith declares off-limits.

Samuel speaks decisively. Israel responds in obedience (v. 4). In that moment of decision Israel is re-formed as Yahweh's people. For now Israel has decided to live according to the prospects and possibilities of Yahweh's covenant. After the massive defeat and the miraculous deliverance of chapters 4–6, Israel begins again with fresh and trusting faith. It is Samuel who makes the new beginning possible for Israel and who firmly insists that Israel has no real alternative.

7:5–11. This section seems to implement with a detailed narrative the stylized summons of verse 3. Samuel convenes Israel at Mizpah in a great ceremony of covenant-making; Israel is reconstituted as a community of trust and obedience. The meeting begins with an act of unqualified repentance, which becomes the basis for what follows (v. 6). Israel is

prepared to trust only in Yahweh. This act of repentance, as the text is now arranged, is a resolution of the alienation caused by the sin of Eli's sons, which brought on the disaster of chapter 4. Israel's return to Yahweh is the ground of Israel's hope for rescue (cf. v. 3).

The Philistines predictably attack (v. 7). The battle ends with the defeat and routing of the Philistines (vv. 10–11). Between the beginning of the battle (v. 7) and its conclusion (vv. 10–11), however, the important drama is between Israel and Samuel. The Philistine threat provides only the context for the crucial theological issue.

In its petition to Samuel, Israel uses the most elemental terms of Israel's faith, "cry, save." You *cry* that Yahweh may *save* (v. 8). Samuel is responsive; he does cry out to Yahweh on behalf of Israel. As promised in verse 3, Yahweh hears, answers, and acts. The Philistines are defeated. Israel is delivered. Samuel is vindicated. Yahweh is known to be faithful to Israel. Covenantal modes of faith and power do indeed operate. The claims and assumptions of the covenantal order are shown to be reliable and effective.

The ostensibly important meeting in this narrative is between Israel and the Philistines. At the outset, the Philistines are strong and threatening and the Israelites are fearful and intimidated (v. 7). At the end of the narrative, the Philistines are defeated and Israel is safe once again (vv. 10–11). This narrative is a recital of a "mighty deed" of Yahweh that has inverted the military-political situation of Israel.

A second confrontation in this story is perhaps more crucial and more interesting. In this dramatic exchange, the Philistines are almost disregarded. What counts is covenantal loyalty to Yahweh. Out of such loyalty the Philistine crisis will be settled. The people of Israel anticipate the conversation between Yahweh and Samuel: "Do not cease to cry ... he may save" (v. 8). The covenantal exchange utilizes Israel's oldest covenantal actions: Samuel cried, Yahweh answered (v. 9). In the pattern of cry-answer, we are at the core of biblical faith, at one of Israel's most elemental word patterns and one of its most characteristic acts of faithfulness. To cry to Yahweh is to acknowledge trust in and release in Yahweh. As Barth has seen, all true prayer is, at its base, petition. That is, the proper human posture before God is one of trustful, honest need in which it is acknowledged that help must be given because the human person or the human community (Israel) lacks resources to secure life. The "cry" of

Samuel at the behest of Israel is an act of repentance, an act of acknowledgment, and therefore an act of rightly relating to God. Samuel guides Israel into the act of faith that is necessary to Israel's well-being in the world.

The counterpart to Samuel's cry is that Yahweh answered. God is faithful. God is attentive. Everyone who asks will receive (Matt. 7:8). It is in the character of this God to attend faithfully to the genuine need of faithful people. Israel's great prayers (as in Ps. 107) are structured as a relation of crying and answering. This relation is distorted whenever Israel believes it is self-sufficient and need not petition; or when Israel believes that prayer is futile; or when Israel concludes that God is not attentive, does not care, will not act. This text invites the congregation to reflect on the cruciality of prayer for a life of faith (vv. 5–11). Prayer is a scandal in our modern world and surely violates our "enlightened reason." We may be sure, however, that such daring prayer was also an affront to the "realists" who took the Philistine threat seriously. Prayer seems remote from the power realities and irrelevant to them. Nonetheless Samuel is engaged in this seeming irrelevance that secures Israel's life. Samuel's prayer in verse 9 is not mere piety or empty religion but an act of courage in the midst of real danger and threat.

The outcome of Samuel's cry of prayer is stated in verses 10–11. Yahweh answers with thunder. This thunder is an effective intervention on Yahweh's part in the midst of Israel's conflict with the Philistines that so throws the Philistines into confusion that they are rendered helpless. The thunder is a massive show of power. In the end the Philistines are "routed" (v. 10). This is the same word used in 4:3. In that narrative the Philistines did the routing and Israel was helpless. Now matters are reversed and Israel triumphs through the thunder of Yahweh. The simple theology of verse 3 has turned out to be correct and reliable. Faithful Samuel cries. Faithful Yahweh answers effectively.

The defeat of the Philistines is indeed a "miracle," a mighty deed in which Yahweh works a newness against all of the assumed data, a newness that can be wrought only by God's power. The church, and the preacher, cannot too often simply tell the story of transformations wrought concretely by the faithful power of God. That simple telling is at the center of this text.

This narrative confronts us with difficult questions. Does God so directly answer prayer? Can the thunder of Yahweh be so intimately related

to Israel's petition? May Israel so blatantly pray against its enemies? These questions must be taken seriously, even if they cannot be answered. On the face of it, the answer to all these questions is yes. Yes, God answers prayer directly. Yes, Israel may pray against its enemies. Yes, petition caused the thunder. Our answer of yes, however, must be kept inside the scope of the narrative and not transmuted into a universal theological claim. One must stay close to the story itself and let the story make its own testimony.

When one stays close to the narrative, one must accept the sociology of this meeting in Mizpah. This is not just any religious meeting. This is a community of desperate covenanters in the face of a harsh set of overlords with superior technology and advanced political organization. That is, the conviction of a social inversion caused by the inscrutable power of God becomes plausible when read "from below," from a context of vulnerability and marginality. In such a circumstance, covenantal faith and practice have force and legitimacy, even in a world of crude and oppressive military power.

The people of this narrative are not superstitious or supernaturalist in a silly or trite way. They understand responsibly that prayer has its own work to do, which leaves God free to answer as God wills. Moreover, mature faith prays and watches for God's response but does not easily equate petition and outcome. Thus one may allow playfulness between prayer and thunder. Surely it is reflection after the fact that dares to recognize thunder as an answer from God. Whether desperate people dare pray for the defeat of their enemies is, for an oppressed people, a luxurious question that cannot be afforded. One does pray so, and then one leaves the answer in God's hand.

Good exposition gives a yes to these theological issues, but it is a yes that resists magical formulations and rejects any mechanistic explanations. God is free and will not be coerced by manipulative ritual practices. The decisive answer of Yahweh to Samuel's prayer is not an automatic reaction to a predictable religious gesture. The transformative response of Yahweh comes from Yahweh's faithful sovereignty, not from a necessary ritual response. God is faithful, and on this Samuel and his people count heavily. Ours is a yes that asserts we live in a world not bounded by our conventional perceptions. On the face of it, the Philistines were strong and dangerous. That is why Israel feared. The reality of Yahweh, however, introduces a wild card into the best human strategies. The reality of Yahweh

creates a new openness and allows possibilities that have not yet been anticipated by the rulers of this age.

Three observations may form our conclusion to this demanding text. First, the notion that God hears the prayers of the penitent and acts in response to give new life and new possibility is indeed a basic premise of faith in the narrative. Israel believes Yahweh answers prayer and witnesses to its faith by telling of such powerful inversions. Israel's faith permits a life of bold, trustful repentance, believing that God has gifts to give that will change reality. Thus the sequence of cry-answer applies not only to war but to every circumstance when the power of God becomes a "new factor" that makes "all things possible." The act of prayer by Samuel is not an isolated event of piety but a posture and inclination for all of life that is marked by trust and yielding.

Second, insofar as this text concerns war and national public power, it is, in our day, the marginal peoples who rely on strategies of thunder in the face of superior technology. This text may be an anticipation of and model for more recent cases in which oppressed communities have no chance for success, judged by military capacity, but from time to time receive surprises of new historical possibility. This narrative shows how raw socio-military power may be overcome by the hidden rule of Yahweh. Such communities of surprise, like the community of Samuel, occasionally turn from fear and intimidation and are able to conclude with Israel that

No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel,
can avail against the LORD.
The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but the victory belongs to the LORD.
Proverbs 21:30–31

Third, this text cannot be used for the legitimacy of superpower militarism, which relies on planning, technology, and massive stratagems of human capability. Superpower militarism is more congenial to the modes of power among the Philistines who never "cry" and who are never "answered." Thus if this text be used at all vis-à-vis our U.S. military situation, I submit it stands against such power and urges a deep repentance.

7:12–17. These summary verses speak of the consolidation made after the astonishing victory gained over the Philistines. The Israelites enjoy a season of safety and well-being, for the Philistines were either unable or unwilling to pursue the conflict. The primary focus is again on the person of Samuel.

Samuel's words assert the theological reality of the inversion and surprising victory: "Yahweh helped" (v. 12). Samuel and Israel are clear that the transformation was wrought by Yahweh and by none other. Israel must always remember that the victory is a victory given by Yahweh. It is not Israel's victory, or even the victory of Samuel.

Finally we are told that Samuel "judged" Israel in a circuit of the central towns of Israel (v. 15). We may imagine that Samuel implemented and practiced the "justice" of the Mosaic covenant, which is an ethic concerned for widows, orphans, sojourners, and all those lacking social power (v. 17). Thus there is an inextricable connection between the unexpected military victory of the forces of covenant and the demanding daily work of covenantal ethics. The first (victory) is for the sake of the second (ethics).

The intervention of Yahweh against the Philistines is to give Israel space for the enfleshment of its bold social theory. Put in theological language, Samuel not only presided over the event of Israel's "justification" but addressed the ongoing process of Israel's "sanctification" as a community faithful to Yahweh's intent. It is the claim of Samuel, and of this narrative, that the practice of a covenantal ethic is a sufficient form of public security. Security derives from justice. The rest is left to the thunder of God. There were those in Israel, as we shall soon see, who doubted this claim. For now, however, the text, Samuel, and the narrator are convinced of the validity of covenantal forms of life, faith, and power.

The questions raised by this text are both important and difficult in our interpretive situation. This text presumes a theological reality that is not easy for us to embrace. Its theological world seems unreal and remote from our actualities of social power. We shall see, as the books of Samuel advance, that we are not the first ones to have an "enlightened reason" which finds such faith obscurantist, remote, and seemingly irrelevant. Indeed, it is an embarrassed mistrust of such theological primitivism that created the theological crisis of kingship in ancient Israel. It is precisely because Samuel's modes of power and faith seemed so unrelated to reality that Israel wanted a king. chapters 8–15, the next section of our text, portray Israel's intellectual and theological struggle with that deep problem.

PART TWO

The Rule of Saul

I SAMUEL 8—15

Render to Caesar the things
that are Caesar's, and to God
the things that are God's.

Mark 12:17

The old order has run its course in ancient Israel with the leadership of Samuel (chs. 1–7). The narrative beginning in chapter 8, however, is not presented as a defense of the old order or as a celebration of its effectiveness. The narrative of I Samuel 8–15, rather, exists precisely to intrude into Israel's imagination (and ours) and to legitimate a quite new social reality. The question of kingship is abruptly before Israel. That question has not yet become singularly Davidic, as it will in time. Now it is a general question of faith and power, of the reality of God's leadership, and of the crisis of social organization.

We do not know how the question of kingship arose in ancient Israel. Kingship is an old and well-established phenomenon in Israel's international context (Mendelsohn), but it is new, problematic, and dangerous for Israel (cf. Judg. 8:22–28). Early Israel had emerged precisely as a subversive alternative to human kingship (Buber). Now the question of monarchy has surfaced again in Israel with fresh vitality and insistence, as though the old painful memory of Pharaoh (the king) no longer exists.

Ostensibly, the question of kingship is raised in the literature of Samuel in response to the Philistine threat. Israel needed sustained military leadership in the face of that enduring threat. Gottwald (1983), Frick, and Cheney (1983) have urged more recently that the matter of kingship in ancient Israel is not a response to a military crisis but is part of a large comprehensive change in social relationships, affecting every dimension of Israelite life. As tribal society with its discrete, independent units experienced political and economic fusion, new patterns of power, wealth, and land control emerged. In this view, monarchy is the culmination of a drive toward centralization, monopoly, kingship, and absolutism, accompanied by the emergence of an enormous economic surplus. The extreme forms of these aspects of monarchy do not appear in Israel until the regime of Solomon and so are not present in the books of Samuel.

A significant move in that direction is, however, under way in this literature. Thus socioeconomic and political factors operate powerfully along with a simple military danger from the Philistines to force the issue of monarchy. The biblical account would have us believe that the Philistine threat is the only reason for establishing kingship. Such a simple explanation (too simple!) is probably designed to keep invisible the political, social, and economic interests of those who would benefit from centralization, surplus, and monopoly.

The problem faced in the dispute over kingship in ancient Israel is how to integrate the reality of social crisis into Israel's dominant theological perspective. Or, more simply, how to relate royal ideology (and power) to the claims of covenantal faith and covenantal ethics. The institution of monarchy does not easily accommodate itself to covenantal power arrangements, but it must if it is to have legitimacy in early Israel. chapters 8–15 are an interpretive reflection on this difficult and crucial relation between new forms of social relations and an old, honored, well-established theological tradition. The settlement between the two came only through an ongoing and vigorous dispute and required a bold interpretive act. This literature is the substance of that bold interpretive act.

The material in chapters 8–15 constitutes a coherent and extended narrative unit. The old critical distinction between promonarchical and antimonarchical "sources" is no doubt correct at some stage of the development of the tradition. Those diverse and even contradictory materials have now been shaped into a single narrative that traces the

dispute about monarchy from the preeminence of Samuel in chapter 7 to the emergence of David in chapter 16.

This literature can be subdivided into two units, chapters 8–12 and 13–15. McCarthy has shown that chapters 8–12 are organized around a pattern of “story” and “report.” There is an account of dramatic action and then a theological comment on it. The “story” tends to be about Saul, who is here portrayed as the vigorous proponent of new power. The “report” is characteristically placed in the mouth of Samuel, who is a sturdy and relentless advocate of the old norms and therefore a resister of the new power.

chapters 13–15 continue the struggle but reflect a decision reached in the literature that the new power must yield to the old norm. chapter 12 gives the theological rationale for this verdict, and chapters 13 and 15 show the implementation of that verdict, which eventually and inevitably must undo Saul. The oddity is that Saul scrupulously seeks to honor the old norms, but his attempts are never adequate. Saul cannot win. Insofar as the transitional literature of chapters 8–15 focuses on Saul as the dramatic embodiment of the crisis about power and faith, scholars have asked if Saul is in fact fated to be a victim of a tragedy in which he never had a chance (Humphreys; Gunn 1980). No doubt there is an element of the tragic in the narrative. An inscrutable power, presumably Yahweh’s will, drives Saul to failure and destruction. This tragic awareness, however, in characteristic Israelite fashion, is set in tension with the recognition that Saul chose the course of his life. His destiny was not imposed upon him.

Saul, so the story goes, could have chosen otherwise. He could have honored Samuel (ch. 13) and the traditions of “holy war” (ch. 15). The pathos of the Saul narrative is that he chose and he did not choose. What he chose had in fact already been chosen for him. Thus his death-warranting failure is not unlike the “original sin” of Adam, which is both choice and destiny.

This narrative unit ends with chapters 13–15 in loss, failure, and grief. It invites us to ponder the reality of power and the threat that seems to come inevitably with power. When viewed in the larger picture of the books of Samuel, what strikes one is how quickly David (ch. 16) overrides these vexing questions. In the presence of this “promised one” (i.e., David), it is as though the questions swirling around Saul did not exist. According to the narrative, Israel is able to move on and never answer those questions. After

chapter 15, the narrative makes a theological argument that David is willed, authorized, and legitimated by God (16:1–13). The literature also contains the odd report that the old guard (under Samuel), who so aggressively resisted Saul, rushed to support David (see Cohen). Real history never happens in a straight line of clean motivations. It happens, rather, by odd alliances, strange loyalties, and daring choices through which the faithful discern the working out of Yahweh's intent.

The period between Samuel and David covered in these chapters is a season of theological dispute and daring reinterpretation of social reality. These intermediate chapters (between chs. 7 and 16) narrate the troubled public life of Saul, who is the historical vehicle both permitting and requiring the interpretive act. Surrounding the career of Saul, however, is a much larger issue. The issue taken up in the literature is the dispute between *the old tradition* of tribal reliance on Yahweh and *the new ideology* of monarchy. This is for Israel a hard-fought dispute that will have no easy settlement. The narrative traces the dangers and textures of that dispute all the way from the settled tribal authority of Samuel to the peculiarly legitimated innovation of David.

At the beginning of chapter 8, Israel insists that it be "like the nations." At the end of chapter 15, Israel does not insist at all, but waits to see how it can be like the others and in what ways it is to be different. The leap from the old realities of Samuel in chapter 7 to the fresh initiative of David after chapter 16 is too great to be explained by conventional reasons. Israel accepts the Davidic outcome of the dispute, however, an outcome that is a non sequitur wrought by Yahweh's freedom, sovereignty, and mercy. The gap between Samuel and David is filled by a dangerous uneasiness that engages both in an enthusiastic choice and in troubled rejection. Israel knows that its history is filled precisely with such unexpected choices and such painful rejections, for the God of Israel chooses and rejects.

I Samuel 8

The Reports of Samuel

chapter 8 occupies a pivotal place in Israel's literature concerning kingship. Here the question of monarchy is first explicitly raised (see the earlier request of Judg. 8:22–28). This chapter forms a remarkable contrast to chapter 7. In that chapter, the old order of Samuel as judge functioned effectively. Through the pattern of crying-answering, Israel is rescued from the Philistines (7:9). There is no reason to think that this same pattern will not work in time to come. Samuel is an effective leader and no fault is found with him. Now, suddenly, everything is changed. The question of this chapter is how to order public power and how to guard public well-being in a community where the leadership tends to pervert that power and well-being (vv. 1–3).

The remainder of the chapter consists of words of Samuel (vv. 10–18) framed by exchanges among Samuel, those who want a new public order, and Yahweh (vv. 4–9 and vv. 19–22).

8:1–3. It is a long time between chapters 7 and 8. Samuel is suddenly old. He is still in charge, but now his sons are also judges; and they are failures. The failure of the sons of Samuel reminds us of the failure of Eli's sons (2:12–17), except that the affront with Samuel's sons is not cultic exploitation but a distortion of the judicial process. In taking bribes and perverting justice (v. 3), the sons violate the torah (cf. Ex. 23:6–8; Deut. 16:18–20). Samuel's sons have committed the affront against which the prophets warn (Isa. 5:23; Amos 5:12). They have struck at the foundational social commitment of Israel, the very *raison d'être* of this community, which is the practice of justice for all, without privilege or preference.

The corruption of the old theocratic authority evokes a crisis that cuts deep into Israel's life and faith. The sons of Samuel are engaged in the undoing of covenantal Israel. No word is spoken by Samuel on behalf of his sons. Indeed, the indictment is not in the mouth of the people but in the mouth of the narrator. Their affront is a statement of fact on which the entire narrative builds.

8:4–9. This three-way exchange between Samuel, the elders, and Yahweh is surely reflective of the deepest tensions in the life of early Israel. The elders, who are characteristically the political old guard in Israel (Wolff 1978), uncharacteristically propose a new mode of power. This request for a king is an extraordinary proposal from that quarter. It is conventional to suggest that the request from the elders is an attempt to cope with the Philistine threat (cf. 4:2, 10; 7:7), though the text does not explicitly supply that motivation. More recently it has been suggested that those who had accumulated surplus wealth wanted and needed a strong centralized government to protect and enhance that surplus. That motivation also is not explicit in the account. Whatever the motivation, the reigning elders must have been desperate about conditions in Israel to acknowledge that the old order was not working. They propose a radical departure in social organization.

The elders want a governance “like the other nations” (v. 5). This is, to Samuel, an alarming request. The request suggests an intense dispute concerning the character and identity of this community. From its inception at Sinai, it was understood that Israel was chosen by Yahweh and that this chosen community of covenant was not to be like the other nations. Rather, Israel was to order its life in the odd and demanding ways of torah and to rely on the inexplicable love and the remarkable promises of Yahweh (Ex. 19:4–6; Deut. 7:7–11). In this dramatic confrontation the elders propose to abandon that self-understanding, that vocation which prized a peculiar form of social organization. Samuel recognizes the implications of the request by the elders. Their request is nothing less than a change in Israel’s foundational commitments (v. 6; cf. Jer. 2:11). Samuel is “displeased” (v. 6). Samuel embodies the old theological self-discernment of Israel now rejected by the elders.

Yahweh’s response (vv. 7–9) is more complex and therefore more surprising to us. Yahweh’s speech is dominated by the double use of “hearken” in verses 7 and 9. The primary assertion of Yahweh to Samuel is that Israel is to be granted its request. It is clear that the monarchy is initiated by Israel, not by Yahweh. Yahweh, however, finally does not resist the request of Israel for a king. Yahweh’s speech between the two uses of “hearken,” however, contains important reservations, on two counts. First, the problem of monarchy is theological, not political. The monarchy is not the rejection of Samuel but of Yahweh; that is the point of the crisis (v. 7).

Second, this rejection is not a new happening but is characteristic in the history of Israel (v. 8). The whole history of Israel is one of “forsaking” and going after other gods. This request for a king is one more step in that continuing performance of mistrust (cf. Ps. 106). The issue of monarchy in Yahweh’s speech is perceived as Israel’s unwillingness to have Yahweh as the source and rule of life.

The narrative (and the speech of Yahweh) struggles between a deep theological reservation about the introduction of monarchy and the brute fact that a monarchy was introduced. The way between the reservation and the brute fact is found in this grudging grant. Yahweh does not endorse, but Yahweh also does not preclude. A settlement is found that does not entirely please any party. The monarchy begins under a cloud of theological resistance. The old, powerful tradition of *šema‘* doubts that the monarchy will work and insists that it does not have the approval of Yahweh.

Yahweh adds the line that prepares the way for Samuel’s extended speech: “Warn them” (v. 9). Let them know the cost of their decision. They are so naïve. To those who request a king, the request seems so innocent. There is indignation and pathos in the voice of Yahweh, who knows better but is exhausted with this people which insists on its own way. They will be allowed their king, but they will hear from Samuel about the “ways of the king.” They will not be able to complain later that they had not been forewarned about the cost of kingship.

8:10–18. This speech placed in the mouth of Samuel is the harshest, most extensive criticism of monarchy in the Old Testament (see also Deut. 17:14–20). It is one of the most important pieces in the Old Testament on the abuse of public power. It is disputed whether this indictment of oppressive political power is post-Solomonic—and, in fact, a critique of Solomonic abuses—or whether it reflects an awareness of the nature of monarchy drawn from the evidence of neighboring states (Mendelsohn). Either way, the statement reflects what must have been a strongly held view among theological conservatives in ancient Israel who greatly feared centralized government. The culmination of political power and social organization in a state brought with it the redistribution and concentration of wealth, the monopoly of land control, and the nullification of local initiatives for justice and well-being. Ancient Israel had thrived on

covenantal localism; monarchy in principle is opposed to such local possibility and initiative and to the vulnerability of covenanting.

The governing verb of Samuel's characterization of monarchy is the word "take" (vv. 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17). It is the business of a centralized government to "take," whether by taxation, confiscation, or the draft. The taking of sons (vv. 11–12) is for military purposes. The taking of daughters (v. 13) reflects a luxurious court that needs subservient labor to operate. The seizure of fields, vineyards, and orchards (vv. 14–15) bespeaks a land monopoly not unlike contemporary forms of agribusiness. The king needs land to reassign to his most trusted allies as a way of sustaining a network of power and allegiance. The king will cut into Israel's labor and the means of production of tribal life (v. 16) and eventually will impose a usurpatious tax (v. 17). The verse ominously mentions a tax of ten percent, which will reduce people over time to a social position of servitude. The seizures of a central government will disrupt older, less developed economic patterns.

This characterization of monarchy is not particularly polemical in tone. It is simply a statement of fact. The monarchy, in Israel as elsewhere, lives by a confiscation and concentration of wealth and land; it also lives *for the sake of* such a concentration. The situation anticipated here comes to fruition in Ezekiel 34:1–10, where the kings of Israel are indicted for having used the community for the well-being of only the rulers. In our text (contra Deut. 17:14–20), the possibility that a monarchy might exist that is not rapacious is not even entertained. There is, according to this text, only one way a king can be.

The end result of such a power arrangement (v. 17b) is that "you will be ... slaves." The dread word has now been uttered. Israel, especially the old Israel of Samuel (v. 8), still had vivid memories of the Exodus and the deliverance from slavery. This royal proposal, however, is a return to the pre-Exodus situation of bondage. It does not matter greatly if the one who enslaves is a pharaoh from Egypt or an Israelite king. Monarchy in principle generates destructive inequality and stratification. Monarchy is presented as the undoing of the Exodus and the whole course of liberated covenanting. Enslavement is presented as intrinsic to the institution of monarchy. Life under monarchy cannot turn out any other way.

Verse 18 ties chapter 8 to chapter 7 by contrasting the two. In 7:9 Samuel "cries" and Yahweh "answers." We have seen how cry-answer is a central construct and practice in Israel's faith (cf. Ex. 2:23–25). Now Israel

is warned that when it “cries,” Yahweh will not “answer” (v. 18). The central practice of covenantal faith is nullified. The most fundamental covenantal connection binding Yahweh attentively to Israel has been broken. In a perfect situation of covenantal attentiveness, Yahweh will answer before Israel speaks (Isa. 65:24). Now that possibility is forfeited. The monarchy substitutes human power for the availability of Yahweh. There are certain circumstances in which Yahweh will not function. In choosing monarchy, Israel chooses a desperate autonomy that finally can lead only to futility, abandonment, and eventually death.

8:19–22. The dire warning of Samuel did not matter. The yearning for monarchy is driven by powerful fear and a hunger for security. The elders do not discern that monarchy is in principle dangerous or alien to Yahweh. Thus they want to “be like the nations” (v. 20): like them in surplus, in taxation, in militarism, in oppression. The inevitable practice of royal states, so verses 10–18 assert, is to place some in bondage for the inordinate well-being of others. It is most likely that the request for monarchy is not a proposal uniformly welcomed in Israel. Verse 10 reports that Samuel said “to the people who were asking a king from him.” This is not all the people but certain partisans, most likely an economic group who stood to benefit from the new institution. Their proposal was surely resisted by others, and that resistance is here expressed by Samuel (Cohen). The ones who are most vulnerable to the new economic and political arrangements are (characteristically) not present in the discussion. Their only voice is the harsh indignation of Samuel. The final hope of the advocates of monarchy is to have a king who fights battles (v. 20), who gives the appearance of security, and adds the prestige that comes through a military program. The old guard represented by Samuel is sure this is a seduction. It is a powerful seduction, however, and it prevails.

Again (as in v. 7), Samuel directs the argument to Yahweh (vv. 21–22). Samuel has peculiar access to and peculiar resonance with Yahweh (cf. 3:19–21). Samuel here is the unambiguous and dominant voice of traditional Yahwism. The social ideology and theory Samuel expresses is here identified with Yahweh and with Yahwism. According to this tradition, Samuel, who opposes monarchy in principle, is the voice of true, faithful Yahwism. By definition, those who oppose Samuel have in fact departed from Yahwism. The narrative continues the delicate settlement of verses 7–

9. Monarchy is not approved, but it is permitted. Samuel's protest is vigorous. It is, however, not finally persuasive, and so the meeting is adjourned (v. 22). Samuel (and the narrative) have the sense that Israel has lost irretrievably what is most crucial in its life.

First Samuel 8 gives us access to the most crucial question in early Israel: namely, its character, identity, and vocation. Israel's early tradition affirmed that Israel had a peculiar relation with Yahweh, the God of the covenant (cf. Ex. 19:3–6). Therefore Israel was to practice a peculiar form of social and political power. This peculiar relation with Yahweh and the peculiar form of social power derived from the relation proved to be a costly embarrassment to Israel. Israel is regularly restless with its demanding peculiarity. In its restlessness, Israel began to seek ways to be less peculiar and more "like the nations."

The struggle of early Israel—a struggle for its faith and for its soul—utilizes three voices to present the crucial issue of power and faith. The elders speak for a new, venturesome option. Samuel advocates the old guard's position, unwilling to accommodate new realities. It is the third voice, the voice of Yahweh, which is most interesting and powerful. On the one hand, Yahweh uses the language of Samuel and the old tradition. Yahweh is concerned with "listening," and warning, and perceives the issue (as does Samuel) as a matter of "forsaking." On the other hand, however, Yahweh does not draw the conclusion we expect. We anticipate Yahweh's rejection of kingship. Instead, Yahweh grants permission for the monarchy. The narrative shows that Yahweh is in theological agreement with Samuel but, in the end, turns against Samuel (and the old tradition), sustaining the new request. The narrative is exceedingly subtle in its presentation of the problem of power in Israel. It has Yahweh give permission but, while giving permission, disapproval is signaled. The monarchy is left theologically doubtful by this "permitted-but-disapproved" status.

We do not know why the narrative portrays Yahweh in this way. Perhaps Yahweh must finally accept the inevitable political reality. More likely, the narrative has Yahweh already looking past the dispute and past Saul to the coming of David. Even the hard principle of monarchy will be accepted for the sake of David. In the end Yahweh sides with the venturesome elders against the intransigent faith of Samuel. Perhaps there is a wistfulness in that decision. The narrative portrays this strange interaction of the three parties but leaves its assessment to us.

The text invites reflection on the nature of the faith community. Questions about the nature of the church concern power, influence, security, and fidelity. Is the church permitted to devise modes of power that secure its own life? Or is the church destined to a great precariousness that does not build its power “like the nations”?

Samuel understands well that people of faith cannot withdraw from public questions. He understands well that every decision about God brings along with it an implicit decision about sociopolitical-economic power. This narrative concerns the attractiveness and danger of political-economic monopoly. The narrative witnesses the ways in which such monopoly may be sanctioned by Yahweh, but in the very act of sanctioning such monopoly is critiqued. The subtlety of the chapter and the delicacy of Yahweh suggest how problematic the issue of power and faith finally is. The narrative does not propose a final resolution to the matter. It only insists that the question is an urgent one, not to be settled easily or simply.

On the one hand, the question becomes an ecclesiological matter, insofar as Israel is a community of faith. This text, then, raises the question of the character of the community of faith, of how power, influence, and security should be handled in the church. (Lohfink has proposed that Deuteronomy 16–18, which is closely related to our text, intends to guard against a monopoly of authority by proposing a division of power.) The question of the distinctive quality of the church as a believing community is before us with reference to the great public issues of arms and economics. It is before us in relation to church money, church membership, church growth, and the ways in which this particular community is summoned to live a different life.

On the other hand, this text poses questions for citizenship, in which believers ask about the character of the state, about the deployment of public power in rapacious and destructive ways. These are exceedingly difficult questions, because one cannot move directly from the text to contemporary social reality. Nonetheless, in a society like that of the United States, which purports Christian rootage, it is fair to raise issues about justice and economic power, about security and excessive trust in technology, and about treating the state or the political economy or the market as an end in itself that in the end “cannot save.”

For both the church and the civil community, this text at least makes clear that public questions are central to the Bible. It is difficult but

unavoidable to ask, What does the reality of this God authorize and require in terms of public power? In ancient Israel this question evoked a harsh dispute. Very likely every opinion expressed as a conviction of faith was also an assertion of vested interest. The power of vested interest surely is at work in the weighty teaching of Samuel.

What Samuel understood so well was that a believing people cannot withdraw from public questions. There is, first, the insistence on the public agenda. Second, there is the discerning recognition that the practice of monopoly inevitably leads to bondage, oppression, and exploitation. In the end, looking to 587 B.C. and the exile, the anticipation of Samuel was exactly correct. In the end, Israel did cry out in need. And Yahweh did not answer (cf. Jer. 7:15; 15:1). By that time Israel was left to its own resources and was savagely driven from public history. While some other traditions, notably Jeremiah, express the grief of Yahweh (Heschel, pp. 103–139), this text shows Yahweh as hard and unresponsive (v. 18).

Yahweh is willing to let Israel choose, and then Israel must live with its choice. Thus, along with the ecclesiological and civil questions posed by this text, there is also a peculiar disclosure of God. In verses 6–9 and 21–22, Yahweh agrees with Samuel. Rejection is writ large in Israel's ideological proposal, rejection of Yahweh, rejection of the Exodus, rejection of the only form of security that will endure. Yahweh is rejected (v. 7). How remarkable that Yahweh concedes everything, does not resist, does not argue, does not rage, does not retaliate. There is for Yahweh, as for Samuel, a wistfulness and deep sadness. Something precious is being forfeited in Israel, and Israel seems not even to notice.

Political-economic monopoly creates a sadness for Yahweh, because Yahweh knows that monopoly ("taking") ends in bondage, the very bondage against which Yahweh has fought so mightily. In ancient Israel and in all the other communities that organize power for some at the expense of others, there is the rejection of what Yahweh holds dear and the sadness of wishing it were otherwise. Indeed, Yahweh is portrayed here as Niebuhrian, as almost resigned to the destructive enactment of greedy public power and policy.

Samuel and Yahweh leave Israel with the lingering question, Is it possible to trust the oddness of Yahweh, the buoyancy of the Exodus dream so that public power need not be for taking but for sharing and giving? No wonder Samuel abruptly adjourned the meeting. He did not know where

such thinking would lead. Yahweh perhaps understands that this thinking will finally lead to David. Samuel and the old tradition are not as sanguine about the coming of David as is Yahweh. The old tradition, however, seems to have no recourse except to wait, along with Yahweh and the elders who yearn for a monarchy. In the very moment of such a defeat for the old tradition, that old tradition has indeed sounded one of its most vigorous warnings. It has issued an appeal, which in the end will create a future for Israel after the monarchy has failed.

I Samuel 9—11

The Authorization of Saul

The completed narrative of chapters 1–8 has prepared us for the dramatic moment of 9:1–2. chapter 7 showed that the old order under Samuel’s leadership was adequate. chapter 8 asserted that though human kingship is a rejection of the kingship of Yahweh and therefore dimly viewed, kingship is nonetheless given reluctant authorization by Yahweh. The tension between chapter 7 (which looks back) and chapter 8 (which looks ahead) is a hint of the tension that will pervade the entire Saul literature.

Israel has by chapter 9 answered the question of monarchy with a reluctant yes. With that decision, it has now to identify the one who would become king. In the Saul narratives a commitment to kingship is assumed, but it is a shaky commitment. The Saul narrative proceeds on the basis of that rather unsettled decision. As we shall see, Saul did little to overcome the basic uncertainty that continued to vex Israel.

The Saul narrative of chapters 9–15 is an odd collection of diffuse materials. Probably this body of literature receives the awkward, disjointed treatment that it does because Saul never claimed the full attention of the Israelite narrative. All through the account of Saul we have the impression that the narrative is partly interested in other matters, either the claims of the old tradition against the monarchy or with the soon-to-come David. Between the old tradition and the newness of David, Saul has a difficult time claiming his own rightful place in the account of Israel’s transformation.

The Saul narrative can be divided into two parts, chapters 9–11 and 13–15, interrupted by the weighty theological convocation of Samuel in chapter 12. In the first set of texts (chs. 9–11) the narrative provides three accounts of the ways in which Saul came to power. These include the idyllic account of the young boy who appears before Samuel and is secretly anointed (9:1—10:16), the public recognition of Saul (10:17–27), and the battle crisis during which the spirit rushes upon Saul (11:1–15). These three accounts tell of the ways in which Saul is empowered and legitimated as king.

In the second set (chs. 13–15), there is an account of a battle and victory (ch. 14) surrounded by two accounts of Saul’s failure and rejection (13:1–15; 15:1–35). Thus the narrative is roughly organized into an account of *initial authorization* (chs. 9–11) and *final rejection* (chs. 13–15).

This diverse collection of materials surely has a complicated literary history. For our purposes it may be enough to recognize that multiple narratives about beginnings and endings inevitably cluster around crucial personalities. Saul is indeed one such personality. This sequence of narratives of beginnings-battles-rejection portrays an unstable situation, unstable because Israel’s decision about monarchy is ambiguous and unsettled during the time of Saul.

I Samuel 9:1—10:16

This rather long narrative traces the ways by which Saul is chosen, designated, and empowered to be the king Yahweh intends. In this narrative there is neither any reservation about kingship (as we might have expected from ch. 8), nor is there any political activity or strategy on Saul’s part. This founding of monarchy is a theological-liturgical act, making clear that Saul’s authority is rooted in the will, word, and purpose of Yahweh.

The narrative proceeds on its leisurely way with the theme of kingship, and a countertheme of Saul as a boy who seeks lost donkeys. This countertheme sets the shape of the narrative; it is, however, the invisible working of Yahweh for the monarchy that provides the interest and dynamic of the narrative.

The story is framed in 9:1–14 and 10:14–16 in terms of Saul and his home and the loss and finding of the asses. This theme sets a frame for the matter of kingship, concluding laconically, “But about the matter of kingship ... he did not tell him anything” (10:16).

Inside that framing, however, the theme of kingship dominates the narrative. That theme is prominent in the disclosure of Yahweh’s intention by an oracle (9:15–16), in the designation of Saul (9:17–21), in the act of anointing (10:1–8), and in the rush of the spirit to authorize and empower (10:9–13). The framing of 9:1–4 and 10:14–16 might suggest that nothing really has happened, for Saul goes back home. Much, however, is accomplished in the narrative. We watch while this unsuspecting,

uncomprehending Saul is transformed into a vehicle for the powerful purpose of Yahweh. In that transforming, the narrative skillfully employs the decisive speech of Yahweh, the obedient performance of Samuel, and the rush of the untamed spirit. Through the narrative Saul is given “another heart” (10:9). He has become another man. As he becomes so, he opens the way through which Israel might become a new people. For this moment of the narrative, there is no criticism of the new institution, nor yet any premature usurpation of attention by David. Saul is permitted his narrative of power and transformation.

9:1–4. After the initial characterization of Saul in verses 1–2, this story is framed as a narrative about the recovery of lost asses. The theme of lost asses is introduced at the outset (vv. 3–4) with a threefold refrain, “did not find them,” “were not there,” “did not find them.” This framing theme of lost asses is settled by Samuel in verse 20 (cf. 10:2) and is referred to again in 10:14–16. The theme has a happy outcome. The narrative, however, has no real interest in the story of the asses. That story is only a convenient entry point into the real story concerning the monarchy.

Placed in tension with the theme of lost asses is a countertheme of kingship, the primary interest of the narrative. The key actors in the kingship theme are Yahweh and Samuel. Saul is only a passive recipient and takes no active part in coming to power. Saul receives the throne but he does not grasp power.

9:5–14. The narrative provides a long, slowly paced account of Saul coming to the presence of Samuel. Saul’s servant takes initiative and provides the ideas and the means of getting to Samuel (vv. 6–10). Even seeking Samuel is related to the overriding concern of finding the lost asses. The search for the lost asses is the only reason Saul journeys to Samuel. The narrative skillfully holds our attention to this theme for as long as possible. Even in the midst of the donkey hunt, however, the text reminds us of Samuel’s awesome authority, for only Samuel can preside at the sacrifice (v. 13). This reality of Samuel’s authority will later haunt Saul (cf. 13:8–9). We are not yet told of that “other theme” of kingship, nor does innocent Saul even suspect it.

9:15–16. These verses are a retrospective report of a conversation between Yahweh and Samuel that occurred the day before. Everything in the story hinges on this private communication. Saul knows nothing about this conversation, but the narrator gives the reader access to it. It is a “revelation,” a report on God’s firm resolve: “I will send.” Yahweh takes the initiative (cf. the same initiative by Yahweh in 16:1 concerning David), which is expressed in an unusual word order in the first sentence of verse 15. Ordinarily the Hebrew word order should have the verb first (though this is not evident in English translation). Here the word “Yahweh” is first, suggesting that Yahweh will in a special way dominate this sentence.

After the “I” of Yahweh comes the “you” of Samuel, “You will anoint.” After the “I” and “you,” then “he”: “He shall save.” Saul is here anointed for a task similar to that of Moses. Birch (pp. 35–42) suggests this narrative contains standard form elements of a “call narrative”; Saul is being “called” by Yahweh for a special mission. Just as God responded to the cries of the people from Egypt (Ex. 2:23–25) with Moses, so God will now respond to the cries of the people with Samuel.

Notice that in this brief statement Yahweh says “my people” three times: “prince over my people,” “save my people,” “affliction of my people.” This anointing is not for the sake of the monarchy, not to establish a new institution, not to enhance Saul. It is for “my people,” whose affliction has evoked a firm response. The saving God authorizes Saul in the face of genuinely life-denying opponents so that Israel may live. Saul is Yahweh’s answer to the affliction of Israel.

The peculiar role of Saul (still not completely caught in the ideology of kingship) is evident in the fact that God heeds the cry of Israel and answers with Saul (v. 16). In 8:18, kingship is treated as a reason Yahweh will *not* answer Israel. In this narrative, however, God does answer. The pro-David narrative will later want to treat Saul differently, but here Saul is perceived as a positive good, given to Israel in Yahweh’s goodness.

9:17–21. These verses depict the first encounter between Samuel and Saul. The pericope is designed to bring out Samuel’s capacity as seer and Saul’s slowness to comprehend the movement of history as it swirls around him. The two themes of kingship and asses play off each other masterfully. Saul comes to Samuel with his mind set on the asses; Samuel wants to set Saul’s mind on kingship (vv. 19–20).

Verse 17 brings us quickly back to the present after the report of “yesterday”: “Here is the man.” There is no ambiguity. Nor is there any rationale about why this is “the one.” God’s electing power is unqualified. The narrative gives Saul authority far beyond the will of the people or the inclination of Samuel. The choice of Saul is rooted precisely in the intention of God.

The exchange between Samuel and Saul is freighted and delicate (vv. 19–20). Samuel guides the exchange; Saul understands very little. Before Saul can even ask about the asses, Samuel replies with an answer intended to change the subject. The change is wrought by the double use of the word “mind” (heart). Samuel knows what is on the mind of Saul (v. 19). However, Samuel invites Saul to get his mind off the donkeys for the sake of the “desire of Israel”: that is, kingship (v. 20).

Samuel’s enigmatic response as a question is a subtle assertion about the monarchy. Samuel asserts that everything desirable in Israel is for “you and for your father’s house” (v. 20). The statement is not excessively elusive. Even the uncomprehending Saul seems to catch the point. He quickly demurs, in a manner reminiscent of Gideon (v. 21; Judg. 6:15). Saul’s protest is left unresolved and unanswered, but the die is now cast. God’s way has been implemented so powerfully and with such determination that it is larger than either Samuel or Saul.

9:22–27. Samuel does not speak, in response to Saul’s protest, but treats Saul in an honored and deferential way, a way befitting a king. He gives him an honored seat at the table, special food, and rest (v. 25). Because God has identified Saul as king, Samuel operates as though Saul is already king. The next morning Samuel prepares to send Saul away (v. 26). For Samuel, the assertion of Yahweh in verse 17 has already changed Israel’s historical situation, whether Saul is ready to embrace it or not. The new situation—still unrecognized by Saul, the Israelites, or the Philistines—is that Saul is Yahweh’s means of resolving the threat and bringing well-being.

Samuel has alluded to kingship (v. 20). The time has arrived, however, for Samuel to speak more directly, so that Saul can come to understand his new role. Samuel therefore arranges to see Saul alone (v. 27). This secret meeting is so that Samuel can share “the word of the Lord” (v. 27): that is, make known God’s resolve to be accomplished through Saul. Samuel and the narrator can speak of “the word of the Lord” without awkwardness or

argument. This narrative easily accepts the conviction that the powerful word of Yahweh is a recognized and effective presence in the historical process before which everything else must yield. The word is powerful and Samuel is its bearer (cf. 3:19–21). The word decrees and asserts what Yahweh wills in the history of Israel. This notion is central to the historiography of the books of Samuel and must be taken seriously. This purpose of Yahweh is other than Samuel, or anyone else. Yahweh’s word is not simply Samuel’s political ideology in capital letters. That word has now decreed Saul. The narrative asserts that the larger purpose of Yahweh has been spoken in Israel and is now enacted. Saul is the means of that word becoming flesh.

10:1–8. In 10:1, Samuel acts in obedience to that word of Yahweh. Samuel anoints Saul, precisely as mandated by Yahweh in 9:16. There the commission of the new king was to “rule” and to “save.” Now Samuel reiterates both words, “save” and “rule” (10:1). Saul will not only save but will reign. Saul will not only do what a judge does but also what a king does.

The two things that matter in this decisive moment are the sacramental act of anointing, which is an act of authorizing, empowering, and legitimating the new king, and the mandate to save. Saul’s office exists for the well-being of “his people Israel.” The act of kingmaking is soteriological. Saul is *to save*. The act is also ecclesiological. It is for the sake of the *community*. Saul is to save and to make this community freshly possible.

The new mandate and transformation of Saul is so drastic that it requires verification (v. 1*b*). Samuel offers three signs, which in verse 9 are said to be fulfilled. The first is that Saul will meet men who will give assurances about the lost asses (v. 2). The fulfillment of this sign is not narrated in the text, but this is unnecessary because assurance about the asses had already been given by Samuel (9:20). The second sign will be the appearance of two men who will give food to Saul (vv. 3–4). Fulfillment of that sign also is not explicit in the narrative. The third sign will be a “band of prophets” with whom Saul will prophesy (vv. 5–6). The promise of this third sign is that Saul will be “turned into another man,” a new creature empowered for God’s special purpose. In his final instructions, Samuel asserts once more that he himself is in charge (cf. 9:13) and Saul must defer to him (vv. 7–8).

This last assertion is made in modest tones, but it is an ominous signal that will bear heavily on Saul's future. Samuel's prominence may be modestly stated, but it is aggressively enacted in time to come.

10:9–13. These verses narrate Saul's empowerment and transformation. Up until now, Saul has been the passive, silent recipient of this remarkable authorization. We have had no clue that Saul either understood or embraced the new summons. Now it becomes clear that Samuel's acts and words of anointing are not empty. They contain a powerful vitality that has in fact changed life for Saul.

Saul is given "another heart" (v. 9). He meets the anticipated band of ecstatic prophets and joins them. They play musical instruments (v. 5), and Saul engages in self-transcending acts that sweep away conventional perceptions and usual categories of understanding. Saul becomes filled with energy and freedom beyond himself. The narrative strains to find words adequate for the new reality. This is the gift of the spirit. It is the power of God that works a newness in the face of established structures, order, and assumptions. Saul, by the work of the spirit, is a genuine newness in Israel. The monarchy, so the text asserts, is not a human mechanism but rests in the inexplicable, unadministered power of God.

Here, at the edge of Israel's newness, is the gift (charisma) of freedom, ecstasy, and self-transcendence yielding to a purpose beyond Saul's own self. The response of those who heard the gossip about this event was one of disbelief (vv. 11–13). Could this tall, handsome son of a wealthy farmer (cf. 9:1–2) yield himself to something that embarrassing? Could well-ordered wealth be open to the power of the spirit that would give energy and courage beyond everything conventional? Subsequent events (especially ch. 11) answered yes. The emergence of the monarchy, at least in this episode, is not wrought by cold bargaining about power arrangements. It is about the release of new power in the midst of the political process, power that changes the shape of the conversation and opens Israel to new social possibility.

10:14–16. The conclusion to this long narrative about asses and kingship is wonderfully anticlimactic. "Where have you been?" "I have been to seek the asses." "I have been to see the seer" (v. 14). The seer told me not to worry. They had been found. Saul obviously tells his family as little as

possible. He does not want his uncle or his family to know about the astonishing work of Samuel, the awesome coming of the spirit, or the embarrassment with the prophets. We might have expected more of a report when he returned home. In terms of narrative construction, the conclusion (vv. 14–16) corresponds to the introduction (9:1–4). Thus far the story of kingship is fully contained within the account of the asses. The kingdom is still invisible and unannounced. Saul wants the newness kept quiet. Neither Samuel nor Yahweh insists just yet on public notice. No one insists on proclamation of the kingship.

Yahweh is shown in this narrative to be the one who presides with power over the life and future of Israel. There has been argument, disagreement, and negotiation in chapter 8 about kingship, as there will be again in chapters to follow. In this episode concerning Saul, however, there is no debate, no uncertainty, no ambiguity. Yahweh moves swiftly to revamp the power in the community so Israel may be saved. God wills the rescue of this people from every danger, even if that rescue must happen in ways (i.e., kingship) long regarded in Israel as unorthodox, unwelcome, alien, and unacceptable. The leadership of Samuel and the commissioning of Saul are in order that this community may live.

The initiative of Yahweh over the life of Saul, a man who thought he was on a donkey hunt, is staggering.

Yesterday God said, “I will send you a man” (9:16)

Today Yahweh said, “Here is the man” (9:17)

Saul (and the monarchy) is Yahweh’s work, Yahweh’s initiative, Yahweh’s plan, Yahweh’s choice. The initiative of God continues when we are invited to notice the effect on Saul:

God gave him another heart (10:9)

The spirit of God came mightily upon him
(10:10, cf. v. 6)

This narrative is a study in what happens to one man when he is caught up in Yahweh’s purpose of powerful rescue and new governance.

“Another heart” (10:9) suggests a total revisioning of the world in a way that shatters old perceptions, invites new commitments, and requires new actions. In the old wilderness memory of Israel, Caleb is marked as a man

with “a different spirit” who will therefore live and prosper in the land (Num. 14:24). In the exilic prophecy of Ezekiel, it is asserted that those with conventional “business as usual” hearts will not save Israel and will not return home or enter the land. The only possibility of a future for exilic Israel is that God will give a “new heart” and a “new spirit” (Ezek. 11:19). A new heart and spirit will replace the heart of stone (Ezek. 36:26).

Our narrative concerning Saul is placed midway between the hopelessness of the wilderness and the despair of exile. Saul participates in a crisis and a drama not unlike that of Caleb before him and Ezekiel after him. God claims Saul and God transforms Saul. Israel can again participate in God’s promises. Thus Saul receives a new heart, a new way to be in the world. This narrative momentarily holds the possibility that Saul (and therefore Israel) may become a “new creation” for whom “the old has passed away” and “the new has come” (II Cor. 5:17).

The immediate outcome for Saul is that he behaves as if he had lost his mind [heart] (v. 10). Indeed, he has lost his old heart [mind] (v. 9); he has become available for God’s power and God’s purpose in remarkable ways. He is transformed in ways that others find embarrassing (vv. 11–12). This experience of the rush of the spirit is an odd moment in the total narrative of kingship. Surely those who requested a king in chapter 8 were sober and realistic. They wanted a planner and a budgeter who would manage the economy and the army. They surely did not intend a king who would be moved by the wind of God out beyond their own hoped-for vision of Israel. But Saul is seized! He is made new! The surprising empowerment of Saul is perhaps paralleled in Pope John XXIII. He was chosen through carefully managed bureaucratic processes but was available to the spirit and was led in astonishing (and, to many, objectionable) directions. This seizure of Saul must have made many in Israel nervous. Is it too much to say that, for the moment, we are watching an adumbration of Pentecost in which the community of faith turns toward God’s newness with inexplicable power and freedom?

This narrative asserts that Israel’s world is not closed and settled. The personal world of Saul and the public world of Israel are both available to Yahweh, for shattering and for starting again, the very shattering and starting anticipated by Hannah (2:1–10). The world and Israel’s history have working in them a dangerous possibility. At least in the moment of this narrative, Saul is not prepared for or inclined to resist that strange working.

This transformation of Saul by the spirit must have frightened and intimidated others in Israel. Perhaps the “elders” did not have something this dangerous in mind. Israel is not so sure it wants to follow where such a leader might go. The next unit, verses 17–27, perhaps expresses reserve and fear about this newness wrought by God.

I Samuel 10:17–27

Critical scholarship is agreed that this unit is not an easy or obvious continuation of the preceding verses. Rather, it appears to be a continuation of chapter 8, which takes a more critical view of the monarchy. This text reports a formal meeting convened by Samuel at Mizpah (cf. 7:15). It is an exceedingly solemn and ominous meeting.

10:17–19. These verses are a formal announcement by God. Samuel is able to speak God’s word directly and is credited in Israel with doing so (cf. 3:19–21). The first half of the speech of Yahweh is a characteristic review of Yahweh’s past graciousness to Israel. As Yahweh has been gracious to Israel all through its history (v. 18), so now Israel rejects this gracious God (v. 19). The contrast between graciousness and rejection is expressed in the powerful initial pronouns “I” and “you” and in the verbs “delivered” and “rejected.” In verses 18–19, Israel’s desire for a king is understood as a nullification of the saving past and of the God who saves.

We have already seen in chapters 4–6 that the Philistine threat is taken as a parallel to the Egyptian oppression. The recital here affirms that Israel’s rescue from the Egyptian threat was by way of the faithful intervention of Yahweh. The text urges, by implication, that rescue from the Philistine threat can come only in the same way, by Yahweh’s intervention. As Yahweh has been faithful in the past, so now Yahweh must be trusted in the present crisis. The Exodus is cited as an invitation that Israel should reread the Philistine danger in terms of the Exodus.

Israel is too frightened and too self-confident. Israel imagines a different security system, which causes Israel to reject its own memory and therefore to give up on its posture of trust and gratitude. In this text (unlike 9:1—10:16), the monarchy is here seen as a flat rejection of Yahweh (v. 19).

10:20–21a. It is odd and noteworthy that, in light of the harsh verdict of verse 19, the selection of a king prevails. It is as though Samuel—and Yahweh—had made a commitment they were determined to honor (cf. 8:7, 22), even though they clearly resent the commitment and regard it as foolish and destructive. Yahweh and Samuel had conceded a king to Israel, and now kingship must be allowed. The selection by “lot” may be perceived as a politically primitive process. It is not, however, remarkable in a society that believed God to be at work in various ways inscrutable to human discernment.

As the text now stands, the utilization of lots (vv. 20–21) is placed immediately after the rush of the spirit (vv. 9–13). The juxtaposition of *lots* and *spirit* is particularly interesting in light of the parallel in Acts. There also a choice is made by lots (Acts 1:21–26) and the rush of the spirit (2:1–13). In both cases it is clear that God is working a newness that defies conventional explanation. The secret anointing of Saul (v. 1) has now been publicly confirmed. In a second way, Saul is designated by a process that is liturgical and sacramental. His rule has not yet appealed to political or military realities.

10:21b–24. Saul clearly is not an eager candidate for the throne. He was not even present for “the drawing,” but had to be sought out. Verses 17–27 are intellectually disciplined and self-conscious but lacking in the narrative playfulness that we have observed in 9:1—10:16. For that reason it is curious that when the Israelites could not find their new candidate, Yahweh tells them where to look (v. 22). Israel has immediate access to God about such a little matter! It is as though Yahweh is closely monitoring every step of Saul’s advance to kingship to be sure that Saul’s rule is properly completed and consummated.

Saul is found. He is tall (v. 23; cf. 9:2)! That is Saul’s only distinguishing trait. We are told nothing else that commends him. Saul is accepted in Israel because he has been designated by lot. Samuel vouches for Saul as Yahweh’s man. This is the one chosen by Yahweh (v. 24). The verb “chosen” stands in sharp and intentional contrast to “reject” in verse 19. Israel rejects Yahweh. Yahweh chooses Saul. Yahweh picked the best candidate: “There is none like him” (v. 24). This is an extraordinary phrase to use for one so thoroughly ambiguous in Israel’s memory. It is a formula reserved for Moses (Deut. 34:10–11), and Josiah (II Kings 23:25). It is

remarkable to find, in this portion of the text so critical of monarchy, such a complete and unqualified endorsement. The people, in turn, are responsive and accepting; they swear their allegiance and receive Saul with enthusiasm (v. 24). There is in this act no reservation and no recognition that monarchy itself is problematic (cf. v. 19). The acclamation of Saul bespeaks a wondrous innocence concerning the problems elsewhere about Saul and about kingship.

10:25–27. Samuel—kingmaker, judge, lawgiver—guides and supervises the decisive shift of the legal and political foundations of Israel. We do not know the content of the “book” he deposited in the shrine (v. 25). Both 8:11 and 10:25 use the term *mišpat* to describe the activities of the king, first rendered “ways” (8:11), and then “rights and duties” (10:25). It is implausible, however, that the two verses refer to the same substance. The first use (8:11) refers to the grasping, rapacious ways of the king who will “take, take, take.” That surely cannot be what Samuel wrote for the king in chapter 10. If he had written that, it would serve only as a witness against Israel, so that later on Samuel could say “I told you so.” Much more likely, Samuel wrote down covenantal expectations for monarchy to bring that dangerous institution and its dangerous concentration of power into the framework, expectations, and values of the covenant torah. (His conclusions perhaps closely paralleled Deut. 17:14–20.) Samuel seeks to curb the unrestrained power of monarchs who act without accountability and who excessively exploit and oppress (cf. v. 18).

If this is a fair conjecture about Samuel’s “book,” Samuel probably lays the groundwork for the prophetic strictures against monarchy for time to come. The conviction of Samuel (and the general flow of Israel’s theory of political power) is that monarchy is always to be subordinated to the more foundational claims of torah. Thus *mišpat* here has a very different function from that word in 8:11. In 8:11, *mišpat* reports on the self-serving ambition of monarchy; in 10:25 the same term, by contrast, outlines the limits of power. Indeed, this second usage intends to curb the very temptations that are acknowledged in 8:11.

Samuel has completed his work. Israel has a king. Saul is fully legitimated. Samuel therefore sends all the people home (v. 25). The conclusion reached at the convocation at Mizpah, however, was not as unanimous as Saul or Samuel or Yahweh might have wished.

The “men of valor,” those of substance and social significance, were allied with Saul (v. 26). Indeed, God had touched their hearts (cf. v. 9). It is possible that “touched their hearts” indicates they were religiously and morally responsive persons. However, since the term *ḥayil* in verse 26 has social and economic implications, it is plausible that the ones who give approval to Saul are the ones who have “succeeded” by the measures of worldly success and so are judged as being blessed by God. These may be the kind of persons celebrated in Psalm 112, where obedience and success are seen as two parts of the same social reality. They had a serious resolve to make the monarchy work. Because they are “men of substance,” one must wonder if their commitment might have been essentially one of economic self-interest. The term “valor” (*ḥayil*) may signify wealth and certainly refers to power and influence in the community. Conversely the phrase “worthless fellows” (*beliyya‘al*) (v. 27) refers to those who are socially marginal and morally unrespected. They constitute resistance to Saul.

It is reasonable to suppose that the new rule of Saul is allied with established socioeconomic interests. From the beginning Saul’s new rule is resented by the marginal, who have no real standing or interest in the community and no confidence in the new arrangement. We are put on notice that all is not well. The tension around the monarchy may refer to a range of social factors. The interests clustering around Saul now represent great influence, and the opponents of Saul are of less social significance.

Samuel (and Yahweh) has given as full an endorsement and send-off for the new beginning as is possible. The resistance of Yahweh is not at all to the person of Saul but only to the institution that embodies a threat to the old theocracy. Saul is chosen without reservation, not only by Yahweh but by Samuel, who represents the old order and who obeys Yahweh. The division of “men of valor” (v. 26) and “worthless fellows” (v. 27) may be a glance into the forthcoming conflict of David and Saul. In that conflict it is precisely those the world regards as “worthless” who rushed to support David (22:2). They seemed ready to side with David against Saul. Verses 25–27 indicate that Saul’s power is not secure and that his trouble only now begins.

Verses 17–27 invite reflection on political power, on the way in which God’s intentionality crowds in on every form of power, on the hidden ways in which social choices are made and power is redistributed. We are left to

see whether the detractors were correct who wondered, “Can Saul save?” (v. 27). The text poses this question specifically about Saul. It is, however, a question proper to every power arrangement. The texts of Samuel show that Israel knows that faith must be given a public form. Israel knows further that every public form of faith which concerns power is endlessly problematic.

I Samuel 11:1–15

There has been a private, secret anointing of Saul (10:1) and a public acclamation (10:24). Saul has still not yet acted as king, however, and it is in public action that Saul’s new authority will be made or broken. All through this troubled route to monarchy, Israel has had one nervous eye on the Philistines to the west (4:1—7:1, 7; 9:16). In this narrative, however, the danger is not the Philistines but the Ammonites on the east. The narrative of 11:1–15 proceeds according to a simple scheme of problem-intervention-resolution (vv. 1–4, 5–11, 12–15). This victory is Saul’s great moment in the life of Israel. It is Saul who stands at the center of the narrative between problem and resolution. Saul is the mode of Yahweh’s saving intervention as promised (9:16). Saul does indeed “save” Israel (cf. 10:1).

This text easily and clearly divides into three parts that articulate a fine dramatic sequence. It is noteworthy that each part revolves around the theme of deliverance:

The problem:	If there is no one to <i>save</i> us (v. 3)
The intervention:	You shall have <i>deliverance</i> (v. 9)
The resolution:	The LORD has wrought <i>deliverance</i> in Israel (v. 13)

The problem concerns deliverance, the resolution discerns deliverance. In between problem and resolution, Saul intervenes to effect deliverance. In the end Saul and Israel know that this deliverance—executed in Saul’s anger—is the work of Yahweh, who saves in Israel. Saul is shown to be a faithful instrument of Yahweh’s will to deliver.

11:1–4. The *problem* of the narrative is the aggressive military policy of the Ammonites under Nahash, who besieges Jabesh-gilead, the helpless

Israelite city to the north. Nahash will settle for nothing less than a full, crippling, humiliating surrender (v. 2). The people of Jabesh-gilead are permitted opportunity to ascertain if there is one to save (v. 3). (Notice the nice connection to the word “save” in 10:19, 27.) The elders of Jabesh send messengers to Gibeah, the site where Saul first received the spirit (10:10). The people of Gibeah are sympathetic and grieve (v. 4). No immediate help is offered, however, for the narrative has us wait until the next scene (vv. 5–11) to see how this crisis in Jabesh bears upon our general theme of monarchy, and specifically upon the destiny of Saul.

11:5–11. The extended central portion of the text concerns Saul’s *intervention* in the affliction of Jabesh-gilead (cf. 9:16). Saul is not introduced as a king but as a working farmer. It is the news of oppression that moves Saul out beyond his own conventional horizon (v. 5).

Two things in the narrative transform this working farmer into a deliverer. First, he learns of the oppression of Jabesh (v. 5). Second, he is seized by the spirit and empowered in special ways (v. 6). In the completed narrative, Saul is already invaded by the spirit in 10:9–13. But here the matter is much more specific and concrete. The spirit’s coming is related to a situation of need and oppression.

The connection of oppression and spirit is not accidental. Saul is responsive to need, with a resolve to act against the oppression. The juxtaposition of oppression and spirit is not unlike that of Isaiah 61:1–3 (quoted in Luke 4:18–19), where the spirit moved the prophet (and then Jesus) precisely against oppression. It is the work of the spirit that moves Saul to social outrage and resentment. As with Moses (Ex. 2:11—3:6), the power of God and anger at oppression together create a situation of confrontation, conflict, and an alternative social possibility. The coming of the spirit is obviously not a vacuous religious “experience,” but an empowerment for social engagement of a very bold kind.

What interests the narrator about Saul is not his internal decision-making processes but his remarkable availability for the visitation and invasion of God’s spirit. Much has been written about Saul’s “mental illness.” What we have called “illness” may in fact be an openness to the spirit and a capacity for rage and care. We may do well to recognize that Saul’s availability for the spirit and his readiness to respond render him something of a “problematic personality.” Indeed, it is his “abnormality”

that makes him singularly useful for Yahweh, helpful to Jabesh, and of interest to the narrator. If he were not open to care, rage, and risk, Saul would not figure in this narrative.

Saul musters his troops by a primitive method (vv. 7–8; cf. Judg. 19:29). By dispatching pieces of a chopped-up oxen (v. 7), he vividly communicates the urgency of action in the face of Nahash's anticipated assault. The verbal message from Saul contains a weighty threat (v. 7). Those who do not answer the summons risk being brutalized by Saul like the oxen. (It is noteworthy that in Judg. 21:8–9 it was this same Jabesh-gilead that refused to muster.)

Saul's method may be primitive, but it is effective. The marginal who have no bureaucratic modes or techniques of military power must resort to desperate and heavy measures to secure allies against established military authority. Saul has no conventional techniques and he has no acknowledged credentials. He is politically unknown. He has no authority beyond this possession and rage, which are perceived as the work of God's spirit. There is no hint in this particular narrative that the people know of the anointing or acclamation previously reported. Samuel is absent. Saul's act has no official sanction. He simply appeals to deep social solidarity in helping a neighbor in need.

It is telling that in chapter 11 Yahweh is mentioned only in verse 7 with reference to fear, as the spirit is only mentioned in verse 6 in relation to social rage. Yahweh is here credited as one who moved the troops by "dread," which may indicate that they feared for their own safety in light of Saul's threat or recognized a common danger from Nahash. In either case, Saul is presented as embodying the most elemental fear shared by all in Israel, a fear that drives the community to common action in the face of a common threat.

Saul and his people are confident that they will prevail (the word "save" [yš'] is used; v. 9). The outcome of the battle is not in doubt. The key word is "cut down" (*nkh*; v. 11). Saul and his people completely rout the Ammonites. Saul is as good as his word. Yahweh is as good as the dread that initially mustered the troops. Jabesh is delivered from its terrible danger. The power behind the deliverance is the inscrutable working of God's spirit. Saul is an effective and adequate agent for Yahweh's purpose. He is the deliverer promised (9:16) and authorized (10:1).

11:12–15. The narrative concludes with the recognition and enthronement of Saul. The narrative—and the life of Saul—are haunted by the word “save.” The worthless ones had speculated that Saul could not save (10:27; cf. 11:12). Saul is now able to deal with resistance to his authority. The men of Jabesh hope for one to save but are not sure (v. 3). Saving is promised in verse 9, and now it is achieved (v. 13). Saul does save! But he does not claim the rescue as his own: “Yahweh has done salvation in Israel” (v. 13).

This is not the voice of an established, self-seeking king. This is the voice, rather, of a judge of the old order (cf. Judg. 2:11–16), who moves only by the energy and momentum of God. Saul knows that credit belongs to that spirit to which response must be made but over which no control is exercised. Saul is not only properly deferential to Yahweh; he is militarily realistic. He can make no personal claim for victory. He has nothing to justify his military accomplishment except the uncommon zeal of his people—and the spirit. He makes, and can make, no claim for himself.

Deference to Yahweh about the victory is coupled with magnanimity toward his detractors (v. 13). If Saul knows the credit for victory belongs to Yahweh, he also knows that any vengeance he may undertake lies outside his proper sphere of action. Thus he spares his critics. Saul’s posture in triumph is underscored by contrasting it with that of his fellows. His fellows, who share the moment of triumph, want to take vengeance on Saul’s detractors (v. 12). Saul, however, will not permit such vengeance, precisely because he does not and cannot claim the victory for himself.

The deference of Saul to Yahweh is not only a religious posture but one with critical political implications. Deference to Yahweh requires a different relation with his fellows. Should that deference disappear, kings and military people may imagine they are autonomous, a law unto themselves. As a law unto themselves, as a power answerable to none, later rulers also can imagine they are unencumbered and unrestrained, free to take vengeance, free to practice brutality, free against every critic and detractor. Saul knew better.

Abruptly Samuel reappears in the narrative (vv. 12–15). He has been absent but now the narrator must reintroduce him, because the narrator wishes to transform a primitive military exercise into a formal event of kingmaking. Such an event of kingmaking (unlike battles led by the spirit) can be accomplished only by the presence and authority of Samuel. Either

as a historical reality or as a literary necessity, Samuel must reappear in the narrative.

Samuel takes the initiative in turning the victory of Saul into an act of public legitimation (v. 14). Samuel summons Israel to Gilgal to “renew the monarchy.” Critics suggest that “renew” is a carefully placed word to link this event to those of 9:1—10:16 and 10:17–27, narrative pieces which are likely to have had separate origins. In this third act of kingmaking, Samuel presides as he did in the secret anointing (10:1–8) and in the public acclamation (10:24). The enthusiasm and gratitude of the people generate Saul’s fresh authority, not Samuel’s urging. This narrative (unlike 9:1—10:16 and 10:17–27) does not greatly depend on the formal authority of Samuel but grows from the gratitude of the people and the prompting of the spirit. Saul comes closest here to being the last judge of the book of Judges, who arises in crises and retains leadership on the basis of action in crisis. Through the work of the spirit and the angry caring of Saul, sorrow is turned to joy. At the outset of the narrative, Israel had wept in the face of the Ammonite threat (vv. 4–5; cf. 4:13). At the conclusion of the narrative, Israel rejoices at its new lease on life, wrought by God’s power (v. 15; cf. 6:13). The move from sorrow to joy (cf. Isa. 61:2–3; John 16:20) occurs because of Saul’s bold intervention, powered by God’s energizing, legitimating wind.

First Samuel 11 tells how this marginal people with uncredentialed leadership, beset by oppression, visited by rage, filled with Yahweh’s dread, can win a great victory and implement a great slaughter. This bold narrative raises two questions. The first question is, “Could it happen?” Could it happen that such an odd assortment of people could win in battle against Nahash, who is so much better prepared and equipped? The second question is, “How is it possible to link this victory of Saul to the dread, and therefore the will, of Yahweh?” The two questions together concern the interpretation of those passages in the Bible in which war is linked to the will of Yahweh.

To the first question we may answer, “Yes, it does happen.” It happens that ill-organized and poorly equipped people who understand that their life and their land are under threat do on occasion win against superior odds. This is a reality experienced not only in the Bible but in various revolutionary moments, when people through terrorism and guerrilla warfare do gain victory, success, and control. The military activity of Israel is as primitive as more contemporary revolutionary movements.

That leaves us with the second question. If and when such a victory from below happens, is it a correct discernment to credit such an outcome to the dread, spirit, and will of Yahweh? Is such a theological connection permitted? We begin our answer with the recognition that the Bible does indeed make that theological connection. We must therefore at the outset abandon our frequently maudlin and romantic view of God in order to affirm the God of the Bible, who on occasion can have as much anger toward oppression as does Saul.

The connection between actual battle and the will of Yahweh, however, is not easy, quick, direct, or obvious. Most likely, the community under oppressive assault slowly and reluctantly concludes that Yahweh cannot will such an intolerable situation to continue; therefore Yahweh must will an alternative. It is in the interest of an alternative social arrangement that Israel acts, confident that Yahweh wants such an action for the sake of well-being (cf. Brueggemann, 1986). Surely Yahweh is known in Israel as the one who aches over oppression, who cringes at brutality, who wills transformation. The sense that forceful transformation is Yahweh's will is not arrived at cognitively or speculatively but is the outcome of suffering that leads faith into bold, daring, courageous, risky action of the kind Saul undertook.

The linkage between Yahweh and war comes through suffering. Notice, however, that making suffering the middle term introduces an important sociological dimension into the question. It will not do to conclude simply that "God authorizes war." If we are to reason in this direction at all, we must limit ourselves to the acknowledgment that victims of injustice and brutality are authorized to act for their own justice and well-being. Thus authorization to war is characteristically available to those "underneath"; it is authorization against established political and military power that is so self-assured it imagines it has a "moral right" to do whatever it wants for the sake of its own interests and policies. Yahweh's ultimate readiness to evoke the rage of Saul and to authorize war against Nahash imposes a limit on the arrogance of the strong against the weak. Eventually the strong are not free to abuse with impunity. The strong who oppress finally must face the rage of Yahweh, which is carried in the bodies of the marginal.

We are here a long way from the peace finally promised in the gospel. Even the gospel must be reread, however, if we are to take oppression and suffering seriously. Jesus understood well that final peace concerns risky

conflict (cf. Matt. 10:34; Luke 12:51). Suffering, indignant people like Saul know intuitively, without any speculative theory of war, that before questions of peace can be posed, questions of justice and brutality must first be addressed (cf. Ps. 85:10). The narrative of I Samuel 11 answers, “Yes, it does happen that the ones underneath can sometimes prevail.” It answers yes a second time: “Such victories may properly be read as Yahweh’s will.” No amount of casuistry on the part of the strong will convince the marginal—the people of this text—that God wills or permits the continuation of the bullying and brutality. God wills a dangerous alternative. It is to that alternative that Samuel, Saul, and all of ancient Israel turned their attention.

I Samuel 12

Old Covenant, New Monarchy

Chapter 12 is a pivotal chapter in the construction of the books of Samuel and in the larger historical narrative of Israel's kingship. It is a highly stylized, theologically intentional statement of one distinctive theological understanding of the character of Israel. This chapter looks back to the foundational commitments of Sinai and Moses with considerable confidence and passion. It looks forward to the coming monarchy with trepidation and ambiguity. Clearly the raw facts of the historical process dictated that monarchy was coming in Israel. The older, alternative theological tradition of covenant wanted no monarchy, or at best only a carefully defined and limited one, subordinated to the demands and expectations of the covenant (cf. Deut. 17:14–20). This chapter deals with the tension between the old covenant and the new practice of monarchy.

Samuel's problem with Saul is not that he had a personal dislike for him. Rather, Samuel (and the old Israelite traditionalists with him) sensed that monarchy threatened the very character of Israel as a covenantal community. It placed in jeopardy the "special experiment" that was Israel. It is only incidental that Saul happens to be the one in office at the time. As Samuel (and those for whom he speaks) struggle with the danger and potential of monarchy, they struggle as well with a distinct theology of history that is in tension with the raw facts of Israel's experience. The raw facts do not always and easily accommodate their theory of covenantalism. This chapter insists that the new facts are and must conform to the old tradition.

Central for us in I Samuel 12, then, is the question, "Can the categories of *covenant* be made pertinent and effective, even in the midst of the *monarchy*?" This persistent question in ancient Israel receives its classic formulation here. This question remains in many ways quite contemporary for us wherever human rights, human dignity, and human worth are valued in the midst of an authoritarian, self-serving, or totalitarian government. We always must ask about how the values of covenantal relations have

credibility and durability in the midst of power arrangements that seem not to value such relations.

12:1–5. Samuel addresses “all Israel” (v. 1). Samuel’s characteristic mode of leadership is always to call a meeting in which he himself is dominant and controls the discussion (cf. I Sam. 7:5; 8:4; 10:17; 11:14). The model for this meeting appears to be something like Moses convening Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:7) or Joshua convening Israel at Shechem (Josh. 24:1; see Muilenburg). The solemnity and urgency of the meeting indicates that Samuel would like to settle this vexing question of kingship once and for all.

Samuel’s own leadership is the issue in these opening verses. We were told in 8:5 that Samuel is old. That fact is now confirmed (12:2). Perhaps Samuel wants to vindicate his personal career. More plausibly, however, he wants to vindicate his kind of leadership—the leadership of the great tribal covenant mediator who functions variously as seer, prophet, and judge and who has been entrusted with the very word of God (3:19—4:1). It is interesting that Samuel’s case for effective leadership is not based on an appeal to religious authorization but to the most mundane matters of economic justice (vv. 3–5). The rhetoric of these verses is like a court case. “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? ... Who is to condemn?” (Rom. 8:33–34). In their awed, intimidated silence, the Israelites do not bring a complaint. Then Samuel himself states the possible charge they would like to make.

Samuel quickly enumerates five characteristic charges against exploitative leadership: to seize an ox, to seize an ass, to defraud, to oppress, to accept a bribe (v. 3). Perhaps Samuel can remember the charges brought against the sons of Eli (I Sam. 2:12–17). Three of his five proposed charges use the verb “take.” By using this verb, it is likely that Samuel contrasts himself and his kind of leadership with the anticipated king of I Samuel 8:11–18, who will “take, take, take.” The king “takes.” Samuel has not taken. The king will serve his own interests. Samuel has not served his own interests.

Samuel is on sure ground. He may be cantankerous, quarrelsome, and authoritarian, but no one can say he is using his office for his own benefit. Israel is forced to acknowledge Samuel’s innocence (v. 4), which carries with it an implied vindication of his mode of leadership. By the allusion to

8:11–18, this vindication carries with it also an implied critical judgment on royal leadership. In this regard it is important to note that the exchange between Samuel and “all Israel” takes place in the presence of “the LORD and before his anointed” (v. 3), presumably Saul. Moreover, in verse 5 “his anointed” is a witness to the innocence of Samuel. If these are references to Saul, the narrative shrewdly makes use of Saul in the vindication of the old mode of leadership. Saul witnesses on behalf of the very leadership he seeks to replace. “The anointed” who embodies the new order is, however, only a witness, not a primary actor.

12:6–11. With the vindication of Samuel, the rhetoric makes more inclusive and more intense claims. The judicial cast of language continues. As Samuel has been vindicated in verses 1–5, now the subject of the meeting is the vindication of Yahweh, who is confessed to be a just and righteous God who has been faithful to Israel. The vindication of Yahweh is important, because the new monarchy is held to be also a repudiation of Yahweh (cf. 10:19). Whereas the vindication of Samuel has been a negative one (noting all that Samuel has not done), the vindication of Yahweh is positive.

Samuel states all that Yahweh has done. In verse 6 the theme is an exodus deliverance. Samuel moves from the Exodus to elucidate Yahweh’s characteristic “saving deeds” (v. 7). The term “saving deeds” (*šidqot*) is important. “Saving deeds” and “righteousness” are Yahweh’s characteristic acts of making things right for Israel by way of powerful intervention (cf. Judg. 5:11; Micah 6:5). These acts have been the substance of the relation between Yahweh and Israel from the beginning. The issue has always been Israel’s need and bondage and Yahweh’s willingness to rescue and restore. Verse 8 summarizes the whole of Israel’s old credo theology, which stretches from Jacob to the Exodus to the entry into the land. Verses 9–11 begin with the acknowledgment that Israel “forgot,” and then they allude to the narrative account of the book of Judges, mentioning a number of judges, including Samuel! In Israel’s past, all that was required for rescue is that Israel would “cry out”—admit its need and its readiness to trust Yahweh—and Yahweh would again faithfully send a deliverer.

Three points are argued in the recital of verses 6–11. First, Israel is characteristically wayward and fickle. Second, Yahweh is characteristically responsive and powerful on Israel’s behalf. These are foundational theological points, establishing the asymmetry of the relationship between

Israel and Yahweh. It is the third point that warrants our attention. The characteristic mode of rescue in times of crisis by this responsive God on behalf of this wayward people is by a judge being raised up. No other way of leadership has been needed. This mode of rescue has been adequate. The purpose of the recital is to instruct Israel in what they should have known. This kind of ad hoc leadership is not only adequate but is peculiarly appropriate to this community of faith. Thus the text champions the old leadership against new royal modes, which proceed on a very different basis.

12:12–18. In the face of the history of God’s dealings with Israel, the anticipated scenario would be that when confronted by the threat of Nahash the Ammonite (cf. ch. 11) the people would have repented and God would have heard and sent a judge to deliver. That is what should have happened and what Samuel no doubt expected. “But you said, ‘No, but a king shall rule over us’ ” (v. 12). In that moment of brazen request, Israel dramatically departed from its long-established and reliable way with Yahweh. Reflecting on that ominous decision to depart from the tradition, Samuel acknowledges the new situation: “Now you have your king” (v. 13). Yahweh has conceded a king (8:7), but only because Israel has said no to trustworthy forms of rescue. Samuel is vindicated (vv. 1–5). Yahweh is vindicated (vv. 6–11). Conversely, Israel is indicted for its venturesome and ill-advised departure from tradition (vv. 12–13).

Samuel, however, is not yet finished with Israel. He is not content to rest the matter with the grudging emergence of kingship. In verses 14–15 we have some of the tightest, most carefully argued covenantal theology in biblical literature. These verses state two options, each of which represents a choice and an inescapable consequence of choice:

If you	fear serve hearken (<i>šm'</i>) not rebel follow
(Then)	it will be well (v. 14)
If you	will not hearken (<i>šm'</i>) rebel
Then	the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king (v. 15)

In the first set of conditions (v. 14) and the second set of consequences (v. 15), the king is explicitly included: that is, both in the demand and in the threat. Note first that the language of the two parts, especially the double use of *šema'*, is drawn from the old covenantal tradition as preserved in the book of Deuteronomy. Everything depends on Israel listening or not listening. Note second that the double if-then clause is closely reflective of the blessing-curse formulation as found in Deuteronomy 28. There is no play or slippage between the “if” of choice and the “then” of consequence. Israel’s historical process over which Yahweh presides is governed by a rigorous system of rewards and punishments from which there is no escape. A third point seems the most interesting. We have already seen that the “anointed” is included in the positive witnesses for Samuel (vv. 3–5). Now observe how the king is included in this warning: “If both *you and the king* who reigns over you will follow the LORD ... then the hand of the LORD will be against *you and your king*” (vv. 14–15, emphasis added).

The rhetoric of these lines is shrewd and devastating. The king is deliberately subsumed under the conventional structure of blessing and curse. Indeed, the king has no individual role to play but is simply one more member of the covenant community, subject to the same summons, available for the same blessings and curses. Rhetorically the king does not even warrant his own treatment but is only mentioned as an afterthought, lucky to be mentioned at all. The rhetoric in fact denies kingship any theological significance. Theologically these verses nullify the institution of kingship! In the insistent categories of covenant, kingship is an institution that makes no difference, simply does not exist, and is not acknowledged. All that counts is the torah.

As if to reinforce the claims of the old covenant and the old covenant leadership in the person of Samuel, Israel is given a sign. The invitation to “stand still and see” (v. 16) echoes the saving invitation of Moses (Ex. 14:13). The problem of monarchy is that Israel took too much initiative and was not content to stand still and watch while God worked God’s own way (Isa 7:3–9). The sign Israel is to see is a thunderstorm in the midst of the wheat harvest. Samuel seems to specialize in thunderstorms (cf. 7:10). Such a thunderstorm is noteworthy; first, because it would never happen in that season; second, because it is destructive of ripe grain and is thus a sign of devastation. Third (and most important), the storm is sent at the direct

behest of Samuel. This show of power by Samuel is like a veteran congressman flaunting his experience and power in the face of an upstart challenger who could have none of the clout the veteran has. Clearly in Israel no king could move God to act as effectively as can Samuel. Samuel has clout with God.

Samuel is able to announce, “I will call—God will send” (v. 17). The same words are used in the implementation: “Samuel called—the LORD sent” (v. 18). The sign is evidence that the old formulas of cry-hear, cry-answer, cry-save, and cry-send are still operative. Samuel still has effective access to Yahweh as no king will have. Israel’s destiny is indeed safe in such a covenantal relation. The outcome of the sign is that Israel “feared Yahweh and Samuel” (v. 18). Israel feared both because Yahweh and Samuel are here indistinguishable. In the awesome moment of the thunder, the two are inseparable. The language is reminiscent of the culmination of the Exodus narrative, when it is reported after the deliverance that “the people feared the LORD; and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses” (Ex. 14:31). Yahweh is reliable, and Samuel (or the old style of leadership) is the point of access to the saving reliability of Yahweh.

The relentless rhetoric of chapter 12 has rendered the king genuinely irrelevant to the life of Israel. Samuel’s show of power in verses 16–18 is offered only to substantiate the theological claims of verses 14–15. Everyone now knows that Samuel (and the old order) continues to have decisive authority in Israel. The king can matter in the life of Israel only by being obedient. The king has no other or special role. Preeminent authority here belongs to Samuel and the torah he advocates.

12:19–25. For one grand moment of rhetoric, the situation is like old times. The crisis of leadership has receded. The people are responsive to Samuel and the covenant. Samuel is ready and adequate for what is to come. The people ask Samuel to pray for them (v. 19). The people had wanted a leader to lead them in battle (8:20). For a moment military leadership is put aside for the sake of prayer and penitence. Israel for a moment thinks theologically about its life.

Samuel fulfills his function as mediator with clarity and effectiveness. The confession of verse 19 is a lament and Samuel answers in the form of a salvation oracle: “Do not fear” (v. 20). Samuel offers an invitation to return

to covenant fidelity, indicating Yahweh's readiness for Israel to have a renewed relation—but on the old covenantal terms.

Samuel combines his assurance with demand. Twice he says, “Do not turn aside” (vv. 20–21). The term used is *swr*, the same word used in 7:3–4 for “put away.” In 7:3–4 the verb is used positively, urging renunciation of false loyalties. In this chapter the same verb is used negatively as a rejection of Yahweh.

Samuel then makes three important points to solidify Israel's recent resolve (vv. 22–24). First, Samuel gives assurance that Yahweh is still in a peculiar partnership with Israel, values that partnership, honors it, and will not renege on it (v. 22). Second, Samuel assures Israel of his own faithfulness to Israel (v. 23). He will continue as Israel's strong intercessor, for everything depends on prayer. Third, Samuel issues one more summons to fidelity, for everything depends on Israel's faithfulness (v. 24). Samuel has no doubt that, if Israel will consider Yahweh's powerful graciousness, Israel will be faithful. Israel's faithfulness is responsive to Yahweh's initial and unending graciousness.

The speech of Samuel might have ended with that positive summons. The summons would be an appropriate closure to a restored relation. But this crusty voice of tradition is relentless. It cannot stop until it has sounded the warning one more time, in case the point has not been adequately scored. Samuel thus ends with one more if-then construct (like vv. 14–15):

If	you do wickedly,
(Then)	you will be swept away (v. 25)

Again, as in verses 14–15, the king is included in the threat. The teaching of Samuel is again congruent with the old covenant curses and with the preaching of the book of Deuteronomy, which asserts that “you shall surely perish” (Deut. 8:20). What is extrapolated beyond Deuteronomy is the last phrase, “You and your king.” What a shrewd and devastating final utterance! Everything swept away, destroyed—including this king about whom you have been so contentious.

We have seen how the king has been a participant, perhaps reluctant and marginal, in this dramatic reassertion of covenant that intends to nullify kingship (vv. 3, 5, 14, 15). At no point is the king acknowledged as having any special claim or prerogative. And now, finally, it is asserted that the

king stands under the same covenant curse as everyone else, called in his place to obedience as all others are called in their places to obedience.

Chapter 12 stands as an odd theological reflection in the middle of the Saul narrative, in the midst of a weighty and difficult crisis concerning the nature of political leadership. It is as though Samuel and his colleagues know this is their last, best chance. If they do not make their case now, they will never have another chance to make it. They make their case in the most weighty terms possible. The text invites Israel to withdraw for a moment from the dangers and ambiguities of *Realpolitik*. In the covenantal atmosphere of this great chapter, there are no Philistines, no external threats. Here there is only Yahweh, Samuel, the old tradition, the sureness of if-then, the effectiveness of call-send, and the magisterial capacity to say “Do not fear.” Samuel proposes a rhetorical world of theological simplicity, sobriety, and sanity in which questions may be reduced to the single issue of loyalty to Yahweh.

Some might think Samuel’s proposal is an escape from the realities and complexities of Israel’s “real world.” But those recurring complexities assault our sanity and dim our vision. The ambiguities exhaust our capacity for right moral judgment; we lose our way in trade-offs, self-deception, and calculations. This text offers a respite of theological realism in a political world that is morally debilitating. This text is an invitation to look again at the basics to see that there is a relentless if-then about the moral shape of the world. There still is a place for petition to the real governor of history, who hears and answers. There can yet be a “fear not” that may emancipate us for single-eyed action.

In our conventional perception of our social world, we may let the king and all the other players in the game of *Realpolitik* loom too large. We may give more credit and attention to such actors than is warranted. If so, this is a wondrous chapter for putting historical reality back into covenantal perspective. chapter 12 asserts without reservation that there is another governance that merits and must have more of our attention. There is a leadership that does not “take,” that does not seek its own. There is a community that could “serve faithfully.” This chapter intends to renew in ancient Israel a moral vision of the historical process when that moral vision was skewed by fear, calculation, and vested interest. The renewed moral vision of the historical process is as urgent now as then—lest we all be “swept away.” It may be that things are not as simple as Samuel suggests.

But they are not as complex as kings regularly propose, or as affluent accommodators often fear. Israel is invited here to err on the side of simplicity in faith.

I Samuel 13—15

The Rejection of Saul

Chapter 12 provides a moment of demanding theological reflection on the nature of power and leadership in Israel. That chapter, however, is something of an intrusion in the overall narrative, carefully positioned as it is for interpretive reasons. The first verse of chapter 13 seems to take up the narrative from 11:15. Saul has just become king. Now in chapters 13–15 the narrator leads us through the accomplishments (limited as they are) and failures (decisive as they are) of Israel's first king.

chapters 13–15 form something of a counterpoint to chapters 9–11. In chapters 9–11 we have seen how Saul was established as king in a threefold sequence of secret anointing, public acclamation, and military victory at the behest of the spirit.

Now in chapters 13–15 we shall observe the undoing of Saul and the end of his royal power. We shall see that Samuel plays the decisive role here as he did in the establishment of Saul. Thus we move from the *establishment of Saul* (chs. 9–11) to the *nullification of Saul* (chs. 13–15). That nullification is, like the establishment, done in three parts. In chapters 13 and 15, there are two confrontations with Samuel in which Saul is indicted for having usurped power rightly belonging to Samuel and the old order. The long narrative of chapter 14 is not so explicitly a nullification of Saul, but even there one can see that Saul is now being displaced by his son Jonathan. Later on, this role of Jonathan will become crucial in the establishment of David, though David is not yet explicitly in the scene.

I Samuel 13:1–23

The purpose of the monarchy is to fight the Philistines. That is what kings in early Israel had to do. Whether they did it effectively or not determined the success or failure of their rule. Thus, it should not surprise us that upon his acclamation as king (11:15) our next glimpse of Saul is in combat against the Philistines (vv. 2–4).

Chapter 13 is readily divided into three parts. Verses 1–7 and verses 15b–23 are notes on the ongoing and difficult conflict with the Philistines. These two elements provide a narrative framework for the middle element of verses 8–15a, which articulates a stunning theological verdict on Saul.

13:1–7. These verses portray the Philistines as having superior numbers and superior technology. Conversely the Israelites are frightened and intimidated, and they behave in a cowardly way. When the Israelites answer Saul’s call to muster, they are “trembling” (v. 7). This is probably a descriptive account without any ideological intent. It is worth noting, however, that the “spirit” does not seem to be present. We are not told that the spirit had departed from Saul or from Saul’s troops. But something is not working right in Saul’s Israel. The Israelites do not act like those who are allied with the spirit.

The conduct of the Israelites in the face of the Philistine threat is a sharp contrast to their conduct when Saul fought the Ammonites (ch. 11). In that chapter the Israelites were bold, buoyant, and filled with energy. Here the Israelites are “in straits” (v. 6). They hid like cowards, and they trembled (v. 7). The contrast serves to demonstrate that Saul is no more on the ascendancy but is in fact moving toward his demise. Whereas the spirit empowered Saul in chapter 11 (v. 6), here there is no spirit, and so no freedom or success.

13:8–15a. Saul’s army is not a regimented body over which he has control. It is, rather, a volunteer militia. Because morale is low, the volunteers begin to “scatter”: that is, to drift away toward home (v. 8; cf. II Sam. 19:7). In an attempt to halt the disintegration of his army, Saul proposes a liturgical act that will gather the troops and contribute to the morale of the army.

While such a sacrifice is no doubt a serious religious act in its own right, it inevitably had the political effect of evoking and underscoring the religious commitment so crucial to the “war effort.” These are the “armies of Yahweh.” The sacrifice was to overcome the problem of lack of success.

Saul, however, is not authorized to offer sacrifice (cf. 9:13). He is authorized to act as judge and warrior, but not to act as a priest. That crucial social role has been retained by Samuel for himself. Samuel did not give everything away. Saul waited in the midst of the crisis for a full seven days (v. 8), as he was instructed to do (10:8). The threat to Saul’s leadership of

his troops grows more ominous, because he is immobilized. Partly, the war is not going well. Partly, Samuel has placed Saul in an untenable position. When the seven days' wait had expired (but not until then), Saul offered the sacrifice that would serve to rally the troops (v. 9).

Immediately, as soon as Saul has finished the offering, Samuel arrives (v. 10). He comes so quickly that the reader can only marvel at the timing. Saul, in innocence, goes to meet Samuel (v. 10). Saul is not uneasy about his own action, nor is he suspicious about Samuel's timing. But we wonder. It almost appears as a setup, in which Samuel is testing to see how far he can keep Saul under his control and subordinate to his priestly authority. Samuel found that there are limits beyond which Saul will not submit. Saul is not prepared endlessly to risk his army out of deference to Samuel. This finding did not please Samuel.

The exchange at the meeting between Samuel and Saul is suggestive. Saul goes to "bless" (RSV, "salute") Samuel, presumably glad to welcome him (v. 10). Saul's action appears to be properly and guilelessly deferential. Samuel's answer to Saul, by contrast, is harsh, unresponsive, and accusatory: "What have you done?" (v. 11). The tone of the question implies that a great wrong has been perpetrated. Saul gives an extended and reasoned explanation of his action in offering the sacrifice. He covers all the bases in his answer. He acted for pragmatic reasons, because the troops were scattering (v. 11). He acted because he did not want to begin battle without a proper religious gesture (v. 12). Above all, the time limit on Samuel's arrival had elapsed (v. 11). These appear to be compelling and valid reasons for his act, which was hardly precipitous. And besides, "I forced myself" (v. 12). Saul did not offer the sacrifice greedily, eagerly, aggressively, or to preempt the power of the old priesthood. Saul could hardly be more deferential.

A man less self-assured than Samuel would have been persuaded. Samuel, however, is not and has reached his own, very different conclusions. He does not wish to be disturbed either by facts or by Saul's deferential argument. Samuel immediately gives his verdict: "Foolish!" (v. 13). He then makes a sweeping claim for his own preferences: "You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God!" (v. 13). This is a remarkable statement because Samuel cites no commandment that has been broken, nor can we construe one. The commandment that seems to have been broken is, "Thou shalt not violate Samuel's authority." Saul seems to

have acted in innocence, not seeking to undermine the authority of Samuel. Samuel's verdict, however, is based on another assessment of Saul's action. Or, if we judge from the pace of the narrative, we may surmise that Samuel arrives at Gilgal with his dread-filled message of rejection already prepared. He needed only a pretext for its announcement. And this Saul inadvertently provided.

Samuel's response to Saul is an abrupt statement for which we are not prepared (vv. 13–14). Nor is Saul prepared for such a verdict. Because Samuel rejects Saul's reasoning, he can only judge Saul's action as a deliberate usurpation of authority. Such a usurpation cannot be tolerated, either by Samuel or by Yahweh.

Verse 13b states a promise to Saul "that might have been." Samuel announces that Yahweh would have made an abiding dynastic promise to Saul and his posterity: "The LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel for ever." The language closely parallels the subsequent oracle of promise made to David in II Samuel 7:14–16. There are, however, two problems with Samuel's promise. First, the promise was never announced until this moment of rejection, which is too late. We may wonder why the oracle had not been previously announced to Saul. Perhaps Samuel had been given this oracle from Yahweh but had deliberately withheld the announcement from Saul. Or perhaps it is in fact no serious promise but only a ploy, now announced when it can have no more seriousness. In either case the strategy of Samuel is ruthless, designed to brutalize Saul with what might have been but never was, and now can never be.

Second, the grammar of the promise is shrewd. (The RSV translates the promise as a subjunctive: i.e., contrary to fact.) Yahweh "would have established," but the fact is that Yahweh did not and will not. Or if the statement is not subjunctive (as RSV), then it contains an unexpressed condition. Yahweh "would have established" *if* Saul had been obedient. But Saul was told neither of the promise nor of the condition. And if Saul had known the promise had a condition attached, he still did not know that the prohibition of offering sacrifice after waiting seven days was the substance of that condition.

On all these grounds it appears that Samuel plays a daring, brutal game with Saul's faith, Saul's career, and eventually Saul's sanity. We do not know if Samuel had the oracle in hand and withheld it from Saul or if there never was in fact such a promise. Is the statement only a fabrication

designed to torture Saul? We do not know. The narrator invites us to wonder, as Saul must have wondered, about Samuel (who appears here to be unprincipled) and about Yahweh. What indeed is Yahweh's commitment to Saul? What can Saul know of the intent of Yahweh if he must depend on Samuel as his only channel? And if Saul emerged as an "unstable personality" (cf. 16:14–23), is this not in part evoked by the posturing of Samuel?

On any of these readings of verse 13*b* the implications are staggering. Samuel's late, conditional promise from Yahweh suggests that the Bible might not have turned out to be a pro-David book but could have been a Saulide document. It is breathtaking to imagine that the tilt of the Bible toward David and away from Saul emerges out of something as trivial as the peevishness of Samuel. We wonder at how the "could have been" oracle serves or distorts the intent of Yahweh.

In these two verses Samuel cunningly gives and promptly takes away. The "would have been" oracle (v. 13*b*) is immediately nullified in verse 14*a*. Samuel comes now to the real burden of his speech to Saul: "The LORD has sought a man after his own heart and appointed him prince." Samuel is so sure. When did he learn this? He must have known before he arrived in Gilgal. If so, Saul's argument and justification were irrelevant and he never had a chance—because the narrative has stacked the cards in the favor of David; because Samuel is so partisan; because the literature is deeply committed to David, even before David explicitly appears in the literature; because Yahweh had committed to David before the literature was ever cast.

We do not know if we are dealing with a problem that is historical report, theological conviction, or literary strategy. Perhaps all these factors are operative. The outcome is that Saul is defeated by the combination of Yahweh-Samuel-David before he ever joins the struggle. Verse 14 is our first concrete allusion to David. We had not known (nor had Saul known) that Yahweh was seeking an alternative candidate. Nor has there been any communication in the narrative from Yahweh to Samuel about the matter.

Now the die has been cast. Saul is out, replaced by "a player to be named later." This unnamed one (who will turn out to be David) is "a man after his [God's] own heart." But so was Saul (10:9). Saul's time has run out. A new choice has been made, all without Saul's knowing the ground rules for power. He has had no chance.

As though to seal the matter, Samuel reiterates the judgment on Saul: “You have not kept what God commanded you” (v. 14). The word rendered “appoint” (RSV) is in fact “command” (*šiwwah*), so that we have a double use of the word: “Yahweh has *commanded* him to be prince ... because you have not kept what Yahweh *commanded* you.” Yahweh’s command of Saul has failed; Yahweh is now committed to a new command. The verdict on Saul is hard and problematic: first, we do not know what Saul did wrongly and, second, we wonder whence came the resolve for a new king, when this first king in fact has had no chance. It is as though the narrator has grown impatient and has used the summary speech of Samuel to get the action hastily on toward David. Clearly, whatever failure there was with Saul’s sacrifice is a quite small matter in relation to the transfer of power now announced. Samuel leaves, his purpose accomplished (v. 15a). He, like Yahweh, “brings low, he also exalts” (cf. 2:7).

13:15b–23. The conclusion of chapter 13 reports on the course of the continuing conflict with the Philistines, detailing some of the Philistine strategy. These verses show that the Philistines had a monopoly of iron technology and that the Israelites were dependent on the Philistines for their iron; that is, for their weapons. Therefore, the Israelites are denied weapons and are vulnerable and ineffective. Indeed, of the Israelites, only Saul and Jonathan had swords (v. 22). This note presumably prepares us for the next episode, in which Jonathan and Saul figure so prominently.

The narrative of chapter 13 intends to trace for us the course of the war. It also intends to assert that in, with, and under the war with the Philistines there is this other force at work, making and unmaking kings, dominating the flow of power in hidden but irresistible ways. The juxtaposition of war report (vv. 1–7), theological reflection (vv. 8–15a), and war report (vv. 15b–23) invites us to reflect on the various ways in which power is deployed. In the end we may expect to grieve for Saul, who was outdone by forces to which he had no access. Even the powerful are helpless in the face of God’s inscrutable holiness. The narrative, however, does not linger long to grieve Saul. It has other, more pressing business.

I Samuel 14:1–52

This complicated narrative presents three themes: (1) Israel continues to fight the Philistines, and Yahweh is present in the midst of the battle; (2) Jonathan is presented as a daring, winsome character, in contrast to his father, Saul; and (3) Saul is a well-intentioned, pious man who emerges as a pitiful, disappointing contrast to Jonathan.

14:1–15. Jonathan appears abruptly in the narrative and emerges as a threat to the leadership and destiny of his father. Jonathan takes an astonishing initiative against the Philistines. He proposes that he and his armor-bearer alone assault the Philistines (v. 1). The narrator presents a small-scale war in which the action can be pared down to a dramatic personal combat. Jonathan and his trusty colleague go up against the Philistines and are completely effective (v. 14). They manage to put the entire Philistine camp into confusion, a confusion typical of the strategy of “holy war” in which the confusion itself is a mode of combat (cf. Judg. 6:19–21). Jonathan is presented as a believing warrior, knowing that his proposed assault on the Philistines is willed by Yahweh.

Jonathan’s faithfulness is evident in three parallel statements. First, he says, “It may be that the LORD will work for us; for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few” (v. 6). On the one hand, this is a statement of profound trust in Yahweh, indicating that the outcome of battle does not depend on arms. On the other hand, by prefacing his words with “It may be,” Jonathan is careful not to presume upon the freedom of Yahweh. Second, Jonathan establishes a criterion for knowing if the attack is the will of Yahweh (v. 10). Third, the sign is implemented and Jonathan concludes that the attack is intended by God (v. 12).

This narrative raises questions for us, because it seems almost magical in its supernaturalist tendencies, as though Yahweh is an available force for war. However, it is more likely that the narrative is not so theologically sophisticated or precise as to connect Yahweh to war in a direct cause-and-effect way. In such a legendary account of a folk hero (Jonathan), the will of Yahweh, the courage of the hero, the excitement of battle, and the nerviness of the enterprise all merge into one. We must not sort the factors out too precisely.

We must not impose on the narrative any alien religious claim, either. The story is not inclined to supernaturalism. Rather, this is the account of a tribal people amazed when victory came that they little expected. They had

no alternative but to discern the outcome of the battle as the will and work of Yahweh and no alternative but to celebrate Yahweh's faithful intervention. It was the only way the story could be told.

14:16–23. Again we are made aware of the small-scale nature of the combat. Men of Saul watched the battle from a distance and decided to join. Taking the ark with them (v. 18), Saul led his troops to the battle initiated by Jonathan. As the battle gained momentum, Saul was joined by other “Hebrews,” who were not Israelites (v. 21), and others of the hill country (v. 22). The conclusion of verse 23 corresponds to Jonathan's initial hopeful “perhaps” of verse 6. Yahweh had won a great victory in the midst of Israel. The mention of Hebrews and the hill country suggests that the army of Saul is a company of socially marginal and disadvantaged people.

14:24–35. The battle narrative is now interrupted. Characteristically, the narrative is not interested in the large conflict but in the personal face-to-face encounter in which life and death are held in the balance by speeches and actions that twist and shape Israel's destiny. The battle report resumes in verse 36. By then everything has been changed and refocused.

These verses contain two curious ritual practices on Saul's part. First, without any explanation, Saul vows to have killed any Israelite who eats that day (v. 24). Out of fear Saul's subjects conformed to the vows (vv. 25–26)—but not all of them; all, the narrative says, “but Jonathan” (v. 27). Everything hangs on this turn in the story. Jonathan did not know of the oath and violates it in ignorance (v. 27). When told of the oath, however, Jonathan expresses no regret, chagrin, or fear but only a levelheaded recognition that his father's oath was stupid, since to fight the Philistines the soldiers need all the energy available.

Second, the people, ravished with hunger, fell upon the spoil and began to eat the captured animals. Now a danger more severe than the violation of Saul's oath is at issue. Israel is in danger of the solemn violation of blood (cf. Gen. 9:4–5). To cope with this problem Saul has an altar built, which will dispose of the blood and so minimize the danger. Saul is a scrupulously pious man.

14:36–46. These verses narrate a pathos-filled episode. Again, without regret, Jonathan concedes that he has eaten and has violated Saul's oath (v.

43). Saul is adamant in his response to Jonathan. He asserts that the oath must be honored at all costs, even at the cost of his own son (v. 44). Here a father is prepared to sacrifice his own beloved son for what the father perceives to be public interest.

The people are not as committed to Saul's version of public interest as Saul imagines, however. They intervene on behalf of Jonathan, their hero (v. 45). They ask a rhetorical question to which the answer is a resounding no: Shall we kill our boldest warrior for the sake of our foolish oath? (v. 45). Saul's posturing, albeit pious, is not acceptable to the people, who answer their own question: "Far from it!" They value Jonathan more than the oath: "Not a hair on his head shall fall" (cf. Matt. 10:30). This is a statement of respect, honor, and gratitude. Perhaps it is also a quiet threat against Saul: You will touch Jonathan over our dead bodies. Saul does not even answer their refusal. Perhaps Saul is ready to be vetoed.

To the narrator, the protesting public has easily won the point. Public opinion and the affirmation of Jonathan's bravery overpower the threat of the violated oath. Saul holds to a primitive religious view of his situation longer than his compatriots, who are more pragmatic. In the end Jonathan is "ransomed," delivered from the power and danger of death, from the fearful piety of his father.

14:47–52. The conclusion of the chapter is a summary of Saul's effective reign. First come Saul's military achievements. The narrator concludes that "he ... delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them" (v. 48). It was asked early in the narrative if Saul could "save" (10:27). The tradition is unambiguous in its verdict. Saul can and did save. Saul rescued Israel from the suffering and humiliation of defeat. Then we are told of Saul's family (vv. 49–51). Of special interest is the placement of Abner in the center of the family. In time to come, long after Saul is gone, Abner will emerge as a great man who helps shape Israel's destiny (II Sam. 3:12–21, 38). Saul continues to recruit troops for the ongoing conflict with the Philistines (v. 52). In the material to come, however, Saul's main attention is closer to home, directed against the one who is "after the Lord's heart" (13:14). For the moment, the narrative hints that the alternative king announced in 13:14 might be Jonathan (see Jobling). Jonathan, however, only keeps the royal place warm until he can hand it over to David.

Chapter 14 invites reflection on the tense interface of public policy (war) and personal piety (the oath). The execution of the war against the Philistines is a most important concern of Israel. Saul's foolish oath disrupts the war effort by turning energy away from the Philistines. At the center of the tension of policy and piety, between the war and the oath, is the attractive figure of Jonathan. He seems to transcend the problem that has so entangled Saul. In a free and unburdened way, Jonathan acts on what he regards as his proper responsibility. Because of Jonathan, Israel has more energy for the battle. Conversely, the fearful power of Saul's oath is overcome and nullified. We are given no hint of Saul's reaction to Jonathan's attractiveness. Perhaps Jonathan's standing with the community (cf. v. 45) is a foretaste of the greater attractiveness of David in time to come. Saul is not yet fated to be the loser. The narrative, however, begins to suggest a darkness hovering over Saul's life, a darkness here embodied in the freedom and attractiveness of Jonathan.

That destructive darkness (which becomes the main theme of the Saul narrative) is given precise articulation by Samuel, who announces Saul's rejection by Yahweh (13:13–14). But Samuel's verdict is a late, formal conclusion. The more powerful, subtle, and ominous form of the destructive darkness in Saul's life is the threat that wells up slowly and relentlessly within the narrative itself, not the crisp theological verdict of Samuel. We can detect that events are beginning to work against Saul. The narrative, unlike the verdict of Samuel, is not explicit. But the threat is there before it is given explicit form. Samuel's formal verdict only expresses what is already under way in the narrative.

Things are much more difficult for Saul than for Jonathan, for Saul is burdened by fear and ill-conceived piety. How could this father think to sacrifice his son in the midst of conflict? On the face of it Saul seems foolishly pious, and we reject his odd oath as barbaric and absurd. Two other factors, however, enter our consideration. First, Saul felt the demand of faith required this costly oath as surely as father Abraham felt required to offer his son (Gen. 22:1–14). How strange—we take Abraham as a model of radical faith but treat Saul as unbalanced or foolhardy. Second, Saul operated with sincere faith; only at the last was he talked out of his resolve by the practical voice of the people, and we are relieved. We must note, however, that Saul's "listening to the people" will in chapter 15 (vv. 20, 24) evoke the harsh judgment of Samuel. The narrative crafts a no-win situation

for Saul, a pious man who makes an oath he thinks is obedience. We regard him as foolhardy, but it is faith as serious as that of Abraham. When he yields to the people we are glad, but such yielding will, in the next chapter, cost him his throne. What should Saul do? We do not know, and the narrator gives us no help. The narrative is a reflection on the complicated entanglement of piety and policy, faith and reality. The tensions are so sharp for Saul, while the resolutions are so subtle and hidden.

Saul is a burdened man whose faith is serious, even if misguided. Jonathan is a simpler person, more free in his faith. When this father and son return to their bivouac after the battle, they are not empty, spent characters in a daytime serial. At night their tents are filled, like ours, with ambiguity, alienation, doubt, fear, and faith. In the midst of all these night visitors, we (and they) cling to the “perhaps” of faith (v. 6). The direction in which that “perhaps” will lead is not assured, but “perhaps” is all we (and they) are given. Jonathan’s “perhaps” turns out to be more faithful than Saul’s dark certitude, but neither of them knew it ahead of time. The knowledge of God’s “perhaps” (which articulates both God’s freedom and God’s hiddenness) emerges only in the daily handling of public issues by Saul and Jonathan.

I Samuel 15:1–35

In chapter 15 the narrative arrives at the termination of Saul’s sanctioned reign. After this chapter, Saul fights a hopeless, losing battle against Yahweh, Samuel, and David to retain his throne. By the end of this chapter, Saul is judged by the narrative to be illegitimate. He will continue as *de facto* king through the remainder of I Samuel, but the divine approval giving him his only claim to the throne will have been withdrawn. Samuel the kingmaker now appears in the role of king breaker. Saul is the broken king.

This chapter ostensibly concerns Saul’s conduct of the war against the Amalekites. A careful reading, however, suggests that the conflict with the Amalekites is simply used as an occasion for a formal, authoritative theological statement in the mouth of Samuel. Here Samuel articulates the most rigorous and demanding claims of covenantal theology. In this presentation, covenant theology is so fixed and demanding that it cannot

take into account the historical realities with which Saul had to cope. The stringent and uncompromising requirements of this theology make it inevitable and inescapable that Saul will be judged a failure. The theology for which Samuel speaks envisions a king who is only a servant of a most traditional faith.

On the face of it, Saul is presented as a failure. It is possible that the chapter contains more subtlety than simply a dismissal of the king. Perhaps in the end the chapter also criticizes the old theology as irrelevant to the realities of life. On a surface reading, however, the text (and Samuel as its main speaker) are undisturbed by such destructive rigor. The text proceeds on the unflinching conviction that the old demanding theology is indeed the voice of God. Against that voice Saul has no chance. As a result of that theology, Saul is sure to be broken. And Samuel is sure to be the king breaker. But as the text has it, it is the rigor of covenant that finally breaks Saul.

The intent of the story line is the nullification of Saul. Along with the fate of Saul, the narrative portrays Samuel as the uncompromising voice of the old covenantal tradition. Samuel has of course voiced that tradition in earlier episodes. Here, however, he appears in his hardest, most rigorous, most uncompromising posture. Indeed, Samuel's passion for covenant requirements reaches ideological proportions, because he is unwilling (or unable) to relate his demands to the political realities with which Saul must struggle. In the narrative we are able to notice the ideological propensity of the old tradition, the impossible situation of Saul in the face of such ideology, and the opening made for David by the triumph of the old tradition, which still needs a winsome political presence.

15:1–3. Samuel is still in control. The old order has one last hurrah. Samuel reminds Saul that the outcome of anointing (10:2) is that the king must “listen” (i.e., obey [*šema'*]; v. 1). This simple sentence contains an entire theory of royal power.

The word *sešma'* on the lips of Samuel skillfully holds two claims together. On the one hand, *šema'* invokes the claims of the Deuteromic tradition with its enormous rigor, its requirement of uncompromising faith, its passion for obedience (cf. Deut. 6:4), and its savage resistance to non-Israelites (cf. Deut. 7:1–6). On the other hand, the same verb, *šema'*, asserts the immediate authority of Samuel, who is the present unchallenged

mediator and interpreter of the covenant tradition of Deuteronomy. Saul must heed not only the old tradition but the present interpretation of that tradition, which is monopolized by this powerful covenantal party in Israel. The covenant tradition of Deuteronomy is not simply an old, honored text. It is also a vigorous contemporary enterprise of interpretation that is partisan, authoritative, and tenacious. In the claim of verse 1, Samuel asserts not only the centrality of this textual tradition but also the authority of an interpretive enterprise. Saul must submit to both. The textual tradition is classic in its claims. The interpretive enterprise is militant in its partisan perspective. Saul cannot obey the text unless he also heeds the present interpretation.

The king is not a free man with policy options. He is under the tight mandate of Yahweh's will, mediated only through Samuel. Thus the real power is in the old traditional voice of the mediator, to which the king must give total allegiance (cf. 3:19–21).

The basic premise of Samuel's theology is asserted in verse 1. After that sweeping claim, verses 2–3 follow (for Samuel) nicely and easily. Verse 1 summons Saul to obey. Verses 2–3 specify what Saul is to do by way of obedience. The covenantal authority of verse 1 is implemented in the traditional claims of holy war in verses 2–3. The tradition has a long, powerful, unforgiving memory. The old, old debt Israel has against the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–16) is now to be settled. Samuel authorizes a vengeful settlement of a memory centuries old. The concrete warrant is the law of Deuteronomy 25:17–19 (the final law in the corpus of Deuteronomy), which mandates destruction of the Amalekites. The will of God, as articulated by Samuel, is that the Amalekites must be exterminated (“utterly destroyed,” *herem*) and none must be “spared.”

From the perspective of the old covenant ideology, that mandate makes good sense. Read from the perspective of Saul's present strategic situation, Samuel's mandate is a dangerous political irrelevancy that leads away from the proper questions of political power. The command is irrelevant because we have no hint that the Amalekites are present in any effective way as a factor in Israel's life. It is a dangerous command because a state-building king cannot afford such ideological extremities. If one were to draw a contemporary analogy, Saul is confronted by one-issue politics from the Political Action Committee (i.e., Samuel) that put him in office. Saul must

decide if Samuel's determined covenantal ideology will be permitted to shape, and perhaps destroy, his governance.

Samuel's absolutist claims here are subtle and multidimensioned. Most broadly, Samuel's one issue is uncompromising loyalty to Yahweh. At another level, his claim is uncompromising loyalty to Samuel, who is the only valid voice of Yahweh. Or even more specifically, Samuel's absolutism concerns the rigorous implementation of *herem* against the Amalekites. The problem for Saul is that all these levels of demand are equated and identified with one another. Saul is not permitted to distinguish between loyalty to Yahweh, loyalty to Samuel, and destruction of the Amalekites. That of course is the way with one-issue political ideology. The broad claim of patriotism or orthodoxy, acceptable in itself, is identified with or reduced to a specific concrete act on which there is no compromise. Saul cannot resist the concrete demand (in this case "holy war" destruction) without being guilty of rejecting larger loyalties to Samuel and to Yahweh. As all creatures of one-issue political ideology, Saul is in a desperate and hopeless situation. He has been created by the "Yahweh alone" party of Samuel; now he is being summoned to a concrete and dangerous act of allegiance to that party.

15:4–9. Saul sets out to honor the mandate. He still obediently responds to Samuel's authority. Verses 4–7 narrate the defeat of the Amalekites. As the conquering hero, Saul attempts to follow the intent and spirit of Samuel's mandate without following the letter of the mandate all the way to utter destruction (vv. 8–9). Verse 9 anticipates what is to come by making "Saul and his people" the subject of the action. The sentence is shaped so that one cannot sort out what is decided by Saul and what is willed by the people. Saul and his troops "utterly destroy" what is worthless (v. 9). Thus far the mandate is enacted. They do not, however, "utterly destroy" the best of what was captured, and they spare Agag, king of the Amalekites (v. 9). The key words, "utterly destroy" and "spare," words from Samuel's initial command (v. 3), are used to establish that Saul and the people knowingly and willfully departed from Samuel's charge. We are given no reason for their disobedience. We are left to observe the incongruity between Samuel's charge and Saul's implementation.

15:10–16. We anticipate a report from Saul back to Samuel. Before that can happen, however, verse 10 announces a word to Samuel that completely reshapes the narrative. The word comes abruptly: “I repent that I have made Saul king.” Yahweh regrets the choice of Saul and nullifies that choice. The reason for Yahweh’s repentance is Saul’s disobedience. Here, in contrast to 13:13, the disobeyed command is clear. The commandment of “utterly destroy” (*herem*) has been violated. It is worth observing that the verse has “commandments” (“words”) in the plural. It is as though Saul has massively disobeyed the words of Yahweh (and of Samuel). But only the single example of *herem* is given in this chapter. Most likely the statement means to generalize from this single disobedience that Saul is characteristically disobedient. We are not told how Yahweh (and Samuel) can so quickly know of Saul’s conduct. But they know. They always know!

The die is cast! Saul may occupy the office of king, but he is no longer Yahweh’s king. Therefore he is no longer Samuel’s king, no longer the king of the old guard, and eventually no longer king at all.

In the meeting of Samuel and Saul, Saul is appropriately deferential, as politicians must be before their ideological patrons. Saul begins by declaring full allegiance (v. 13). In his defense Saul shrewdly uses the singular “commandment” (“words”), in contrast to Yahweh’s plural in verse 11. Saul claims he has been obedient, but he narrows the scope of obedience to the present case. Whereas Yahweh (and Samuel) wants to generalize about obedience and disobedience, Saul resists such generalization.

Samuel knows better, however, for Yahweh has disclosed to him Saul’s failure (v. 10). Samuel cunningly listens and hears the sound of sheep and oxen, the very sheep and oxen that should have been “utterly destroyed” (v. 14). The play on the word *šemaʿ* is suggestive. Saul has not “listened.” Now Samuel “listens.” He is a most attentive listener, and he hears enough to indict Saul.

In self-defense, Saul uses the key words of Samuel’s mandate to him, “spare” and “utterly destroy” (v. 15). Saul sorts out the terms carefully, much too carefully for Samuel. In an honest echoing of verse 9, Saul reports that the best sheep and oxen were spared and the rest utterly destroyed. The illicit sparing is justified on the grounds that the best of the livestock are intended for sacrifice “to the LORD your God.”

Saul's self-justification in verse 15 contains two striking acts of distancing. First, Saul says "the people spared" all that was good. In verse 9, however, the narrative says, "Saul and the people spared." There is a discrepancy between Saul's reporting of the event and the narrator's. Saul speaks out of a selective memory, as though he had obeyed the intent of the mandate from Samuel. From what we have seen of Saul's almost superstitious piety (cf. 14:24), it is likely he imagines himself innocent. His defense is reminiscent of that of Adam, who seeks to shift the blame for his action (cf. Gen. 3:12). Second, the sacrifice is intended for the "LORD your God," not "our" God or "my" God. Saul seems almost to remove himself from the sphere of God's reign, defending himself by rhetorically removing himself from the event.

Saul's defense, however, is not convincing to Samuel. Samuel spots the deep contradiction between Saul's "facts" (vv. 13, 15) and Yahweh's disclosure (v. 10). Samuel takes as true the word of Yahweh, not the word of Saul, and rejects Saul's self-defense.

15:17–31. These verses are among some of the most pivotal in the Old Testament for shaping the life and faith of Israel. Samuel's initial speech sounds like a legal process (vv. 17–19). It consists of three elements. The first element is a reminder to Saul that he is in fact a nobody. His only claim to power is that he has been anointed by Yahweh through the powerful legitimation of Samuel (v. 17). This reminder is a severe reprimand. It asserts that Saul has no standing ground apart from the support of Samuel and those whom he represents. The second element reiterates the commission of verses 2–3 (v. 18). The word order places the stress on "utterly destroy." Third, there is an indictment with three questions (v. 19). The primary indictment concerns the verb "listen" (*šema'*): Why did you not listen? It was asserted in verse 1 that Saul's anointing is for listening. As the anointed one, Saul's only charge was to listen, but he now imagines himself so autonomous that he can decide for himself and need listen no longer. The other acts of disobedience (sparing the spoil, doing what was evil) are directly attributable to not listening.

Saul's defense is as vigorous as he can muster (vv. 20–21). Once again he contradicts the narrator's reporting of the event. In order to vindicate himself, Saul divides the compound subject of "Saul and the people" (v. 9) to say Saul is innocent, the people are guilty. "I have listened (obeyed) ... I

have utterly destroyed.... But *the people* took of the spoil” (emphasis added). Moreover, even the action of the people is not an act of disobedience, for they intended only sacrifice. We are left uneasy about the argument and not sure what to make of it. We are witnessing the destruction of Saul’s rule. Is he engaged in a cover-up? The decision of Yahweh and the verdict of Samuel are based on a close, careful reading of the evidence. Indeed, Samuel’s verdict may strike us as the tendentious assertion of an ideological position. The voice of Samuel (and Yahweh) is powerful and irresistible. History moves on. Saul will be left hopelessly behind.

Samuel’s initial response to Saul’s self-defense is cast as poetry (vv. 22–23). The conclusion reached in these verses is consistent with the premise of verse 1, where Samuel asserts that anointing is for *listening*. Saul’s role is to listen. Now in verses 22–23 the same logic is worked backward to reach a negative conclusion concerning Saul. Saul has not listened; therefore he will no longer be the anointed. Where there is no listening, there will be no anointing. Rebellion by Saul inevitably leads to rejection by Yahweh. Because he has not listened, Saul has forfeited his election and his throne. The argument is devastatingly simple, and ruthless in its conclusion.

In verse 22, Samuel forcefully reasserts his governing premise. Listening is everything. Saul intended to offer a sacrifice to Yahweh, but even sacrifice is not as important to Yahweh as is listening. Twice the term *šema’* is used, and once the related term *qašab*. By “hearing,” Samuel (and the tradition of Deuteronomy) means complete submission to the covenant tradition and to its normative interpretation by the Samuel community.

The indictment of verse 22 is followed in verse 23 with a massive verdict. The harsh words are piled up in angry rhetoric: rebellion, sin, stubbornness, iniquity, idolatry. All these words lead to the awesome culmination: rejection! Saul has rejected the “word of the Lord” and the old tradition and the normative interpretation of Samuel. Saul has rejected the theological ground of covenantal kingship, and he has rejected the political base (Samuel’s support) he needs to rule. The predictable outcome is that as Yahweh is rejected, so Yahweh rejects (cf. Hosea 4:6). The poetic form articulates a rigorous lawsuit. Saul is indicted; the verdict is enunciated; Saul’s power is ended; Samuel (and Yahweh) prevails.

This powerful speech has been taken from its particular context and used differently in the Gospel tradition (Matt. 9:13; 12:7; Mark 12:33); it is used there to assert that mercy toward the neighbor is preferred to ritual

activity. The poem thus serves a different purpose than it does in the mouth of Samuel and in the ear of Saul.

Saul's response to the verdict "reject" (v. 23) is given in verses 24–25 as a confession of sin, an admission of wrong, and a petition for forgiveness. He admits that he "listened" to the people. He did not "listen" to Yahweh (or to Samuel), because he listened to the people. It is high irony that Samuel, now so unforgiving, was himself authorized by Yahweh to "listen to the people" in 8:7, 22. Saul, however, is not permitted the same maneuverability as was Samuel in chapter 8.

Saul's confession is zealously Yahwistic. It is not, however, enough. He has failed Samuel's harsh test, and the verdict is final and unforgiving, for again Samuel speaks the heavy word "reject!" (v. 26). Saul makes one last, desperate, pitiful appeal to Samuel, grasping at Samuel's robe (cf. Mark 5:30), but to no avail (v. 27). Even that desperate act of submissiveness is turned by Samuel into a dramatic sign of rejection (v. 28). The power and legitimacy of rule are "torn" from Saul and transferred to "a neighbor who is better than you" (v. 28). Saul does not have a chance against the resolve of this narrative, which moves relentlessly toward David, who waits in the wings. David is not named explicitly, but the narrator wants us to understand the allusion.

Since David is shadowed in the promise of Samuel, it is important to notice the parallel and contrast between this confrontation of Samuel and Saul and the meeting between David and Nathan in II Samuel 12. In both accounts the king is indicted and guilty. In both the king admits guilt, repents, and seeks forgiveness. Then, however, the narratives present sharply contrasting outcomes. Saul is rejected; his confession is ignored and no forgiveness is offered. By contrast David has his confession accepted. He is forgiven and permitted to continue his rule (II Sam. 12:13). Either the God who forgives is arbitrary or we must acknowledge the bias of the tradition for David and against Saul. No reason is given for the acceptance of David and the rejection of Saul in these two narratives. The narrative, however, does not linger, explain, or express embarrassment. This is the way the story must be told. We are left enigmatically with one "who is better than you."

Verse 29 is a magisterial theological statement. The verse asserts that "the Glory of Israel"—which McCarter renders as "Israel's everlasting one"; Klein as "the Faithful one of Israel"—"will not lie or repent." God's

resolve cannot be modified. Saul should therefore desist from his sniveling petition. Samuel's statement poses two problems in context. First, this verse contradicts verse 10 (and later v. 35), which asserts that Yahweh does repent and change heart, so that Yahweh could both choose and reject Saul at different times. Verses 10 and 35 seem more compatible with the tone of the narrative argument than does verse 29. The narrative on its own terms seems to contain a contradiction. Second, if verse 29 is taken at face reading, Yahweh is said to have always been resistant to Saul and from the outset had resolved to reject him. That conclusion, however, is theologically abhorrent: Saul was caught in a historical struggle which for Yahweh was never serious, because from the beginning Saul was fated to be rejected (Gunn 1980; Humphreys). This makes Saul a mere pawn in Yahweh's larger intention. Fretheim skillfully evades this conclusion of the "tragic" by suggesting that Yahweh's unchangeable resolve (v. 29) is not about the rejection of Saul but concerns a commitment to David that is fundamental to the narrative.

There can be no easy or obvious resolution to these problems. I suggest that verses 10, 29, and 35 form a marvelous and intriguing place from which to do biblical theology, for together they pose the hard question about God's sovereign will in the midst of the demands and realities of the historical process. The question of God's changeability cannot finally be resolved on literary or historical-critical grounds. The verses pose a theological problem about the character of God, who does not change and yet who changes. It may be that verse 29 is an ideological statement in the interest of David. But that leaves us our wonderment about the Saul narrative. Is Saul to be taken seriously as a character in Israel's story, or is the Saul narrative simply a platform for Davidic propaganda? Behind that question is the large issue of the relation between surprising historical concreteness and dogmatic or ideological resolve undeterred by historical specificity.

After Samuel's decisive response to Saul's confession and petition, Saul seems to accept the inevitable (v. 30). He once more acknowledges his sin. He no longer petitions for forgiveness. He asks only that Samuel permit him to save face before the elders of "my people," the very people to whom he listened. Remarkably, Samuel, the quintessential ideologue in this chapter, has enough compassion that he will aid Saul in that endeavor (v. 31). In verse 25 Saul asks that they might worship the Lord together. In verse 31

we are told that Saul worshiped the Lord. It is as though Saul is recognized by Samuel as legitimately Yahwistic. Saul is not stringent enough, however, to meet the requirements of the hard party of conservatism. In the end Saul is destroyed over the “holy war” ideology, which may have been a political irrelevancy in the eleventh century, but an irrelevancy too dear to the old guard. Samuel, as such ideological patrons tend to be, is unforgiving about the ultimate cost to Saul. He does make a gesture through common worship. But there is no compromise about power, even with this obviously zealous and pious man. Saul has betrayed the one who made him king. And now he must be broken.

15:32–35. Samuel completes the bloody action of utter destruction. In obedience to the old traditions, Samuel does what Saul did not do: he completes the requirements of “utterly destroy” until none is “spared.” The commission of verses 2–3 is finally carried out, even though Samuel had to do it himself and depose a king along the way. Saul is rejected. Yahweh regrets Saul’s kingship (v. 35), and Samuel acts out that regret by no longer granting Saul audience (v. 35). We are left to wonder what it means to say, “Samuel grieved over Saul” (v. 35). Does it mean Samuel is chagrined by his own failure as a leader or by his failure for Yahweh? Samuel’s grief may also have a more personal dimension, perhaps evoking sympathy for Saul. Saul and the narrative have come to a sorry end. With a refusal to obey completely, that ending was unavoidable. Samuel may grieve, but he does not forgive. The price of power is “listening,” and Saul did not pay the price.

The narrative invites us to ponder the interface of power and ideology, the requirement of political realism, and the demand of ideological purity. The story gives no hint of a resolution to these issues. We are left with questions of the extent to which Samuel’s ideology *uses* Yahwism in a partisan way and the extent to which Samuel faithfully reflects Yahweh’s will. Does rigid ideology (like that of Samuel) always destroy political possibility? We may wonder about Saul’s vexed decision to “listen to the people” and not “listen to the Lord.” We wonder if the choice, so clear to Samuel, seemed so obvious to Saul. And we wonder if the narrator shared Samuel’s clarity. We wonder about such a stringent requirement of obedience in the public realm, about what happens when obedience must be ideological and does not accommodate the realities of political life.

We are also left to ponder what finally is the space left to Saul before Yahweh, amid Yahweh's long-term commitment to David. In 13:13 we are led to believe that Saul had a chance, but what is his chance in light of the powerful Davidic claim and the weighty resolve of Samuel? What does it mean that Yahweh governs Israel's public life, if kings must make decisions and yet there is a Samuel in the background who always knows more? Much interpretation has focused on the impossible demand of *herem* ("utterly destroy"). Such a focus misses the major point of the narrative, however, unless the ideological significance of the *herem* for Samuel is recognized. Perhaps Saul has done as well as he could in sorting out politics and ideology. Such sorting out is high risk. It is high risk politically to fly in the face of a powerful patron. It is also high risk theologically to act against entrenched interpretive authority, as our narrative insists. In the end we are left with the harsh verdict on Saul: "reject." Such a verdict, however justified, brings with it deep grief. That is where Saul's tale ends, not in hostility or in anger but in grief, for both Samuel and perhaps for Yahweh (v. 35).

PART THREE

The Rise of David

I SAMUEL 16:1—11 SAMUEL 5:10

He must increase,
but I must decrease.
John 3:30

I Samuel 16—17

David as Shepherd, Musician, and Warrior

With the appearance of David in 16:1–13, we begin a new piece of literature. Scholars commonly refer to this extended literary piece as “The Rise of David.” The narrative begins with David as an unknown, unvalued shepherd boy and ends with David fully established as the “shepherd of Israel” (II Sam. 5:2). The narrative traces David’s rise to prominence and power. Each step of the way is authorized by the will of Yahweh that David should become king. The plot of these chapters primarily concerns David’s tension with Saul and David’s eventual displacement of Saul. The most interesting interpretive question is the way in which the hidden purpose of Yahweh is worked out through the awkward and raw events of historical interaction.

I Samuel 16:1–13

“Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh” (Luke 6:21). Samuel had grieved for Saul (15:35). When this narrative opens, however, the season of grief has passed. Now it is time to laugh, celebrate, and rejoice. It is time for David. The turn from weeping to laughter happens because God does a new thing, as happened for Hannah when God heard her prayer (2:1). The new thing, inexplicably new, is this David, who simply overrides the old tension and silences the old uneasiness about kingship.

David is a “classic” personality who draws around him a variety of interpretive narratives. Israel’s storytellers introduce David in three distinct ways: as a shepherd boy (16:1–13), as a young musician (16:14–23), and as a young unknown warrior (chapter 17). This threefold introduction of David has important parallels to the threefold introduction of Saul, which presents Saul by way of secret anointing (9:1—10:16), public acclamation (10:17–27), and military victory (11:1–15). The rich and varied introductions also have something of a parallel in the very different birth narratives told of

Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Such dominant personalities require various tellers, because no single story can fully present them. All three introductions of David focus on his role as a shepherd (16:11; 16:19; 17:15, 34–36). Around that single theme, the storytellers weave a variety of different accounts.

We shall ask here not about the historicity of the first account (16:1–13) but about its narrative function. It is strategically important that David, who is so passionately anticipated (13:14; 15:28), should first enter into Israel's story not by accidental human recognition (as in 16:14—17:58) but by the authorization and initiative of Yahweh. David is the one of whom it might have been said, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). David is not a human accident but a divine intention.

16:1–3. These verses present the preparations made between Yahweh and Samuel for the appearance of David (cf. the parallel in 10:15–17). The rejection of Saul is reiterated (v. 1), but the narrative no longer has any interest in Saul. It is time for a new act and a new king. Samuel is commissioned to go to Jesse, to Bethlehem, outside the reach of Saul's northern kingdom and outside the Ramah-Bethel-Mizpah circuit familiar to Samuel. This is in every way a dispatch into new territory. Yahweh has recognized a new king: "I have seen (provided) a king among his sons." The verb (provide; see *ra'ah*) is ambiguous. It may mean Yahweh has seen one who was already there, or it may mean Yahweh has gone about actively to secure one. Either way, the selection of David is all settled before Samuel makes his first move. This is how it was with Saul as well (9:16). In both cases, the new ruler is by the intention of God, not by historical accident or political stratagem. This act portrays Yahweh as fully sovereign. Yahweh is buoyant and confident about the new possibility.

Samuel recognizes the ominous nature of the venture (v. 2a). It is hazardous to anoint a king when there already is a king! There is no vacancy in the office. Samuel by now is surely identified as a traitorous enemy of Saul, and he knows any overture toward a new king is high risk. Yahweh does not blink at Samuel's fear but instructs him precisely on how to skirt the problem. Samuel is to say that he is on a mission to offer a sacrifice (vv. 2b–3). This may not be a blatant lie authorized by Yahweh, for Samuel does take an animal for the occasion, but this is clearly an

authorized deception. Yahweh will lie, if necessary, in order to move the kingship toward David. We have read in 15:21 that the God of Israel will not “lie” (*šqr*). Here Yahweh is very close to falsehood for the sake of David.

16:4–5. The elders of Bethlehem are terrified at Samuel’s coming. Surely this is not trembling before the prophetic office but because of political risk. They know that Samuel is a kingmaker and a king breaker. Whenever the high officials of the court come to the village, there can be only trouble and risk. Such officials never come to give but always take. Either Samuel is Saul’s man, come to forage in the unclaimed south, or he is not Saul’s man, which puts them at risk with Saul. The elders assume themselves to be in a no-win situation. Samuel is given access only because he repeats verbatim the deceptive words Yahweh has provided for him (v. 5). Only the most naïve could imagine this great one from the north came south for a mere sacrifice. Nonetheless, Jesse and his sons are consecrated and go to the sacrifice with Samuel (v. 5). The divinely authorized artifice works.

16:6–11. The drama intensifies. Jesse’s sons are paraded before Samuel. Only Samuel knows the reason for the parade of sons. Jesse and the elders do not know that they are witnesses of a decisive event in Israel’s life. The first son of Jesse, Eliab, is attractive and Samuel is drawn to him. Yahweh speaks directly to Samuel, however, and warns him not to be attracted to physical appearance (v. 7; cf. John 7:24; II Cor. 5:16). The explicit reference to height in this verse suggests that Yahweh can remember when they both were misled by the appearance of Saul (10:23), and Israel does not need another Saul. Verse 7 offers a clear theological premise: what counts is a “right heart” (cf. 13:14). Yahweh needs, wants, and will have a king with a rightly committed heart (cf. I Kings 3:9). As Eliab is rejected, so all of Jesse’s sons are found wanting. The first three are rejected by name, the others handled generically to fill out the number seven. This narrative begins with the rejection of Saul. Now we have a threefold use of the phrase “not choose.” The combination of “reject” and “not choose” builds the suspense of the narrative. We are waiting for a choice. We are, though we do not yet know it, waiting for David.

After the seven sons are rejected, the question about the eighth son is finally asked (v. 11a). The story draws our attention to the one outside the

completed number, the one who surely is an outsider. The eighth son is the youngest, surely unimpressive, with no claim to make and no credentials to present (v. 11*b*).

Samuel announces that the whole process of review will be stopped until the eighth son appears (v. 11*c*). It is an awesome and unlikely scene, all the elders standing and waiting deferentially for this eighth son, the one whose name we are not even told. We do not know how long they waited, but it must have taken a while, for the eighth son was outside the house, tending the sheep. Verse 11 is a brilliant stroke of narrative strategy and design. The narrator makes Jesse's household wait, and makes the reader wait, for the arrival of David. The story waits, just as Israel has waited.

16:12–13. Finally David comes. This is the one for whom Israel, Samuel, Yahweh, and the books of Samuel have been waiting. There is something wondrously ironic about the first words of the narrator upon the appearance of David. Samuel was under firm instruction from Yahweh not to pay any attention to David's appearance (v. 7). What is valued and sought is a right heart, not appearance and stature. Yet David is handsome. His physical appearance may be irrelevant to the selection, but the narrator cannot restrain himself from commenting on it: "Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome" (v. 12). Samuel and the narrator are dazzled. Yahweh does a quick heart examination and renders the verdict, "This is he" (cf. 9:17). Samuel must have been moved to sing with Simeon:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
according to thy word;
for mine eyes have seen thy salvation
which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to thy people Israel.

Luke 2:29–32

The anointing takes place (v. 13). The act is private and is not publicized; Israel and Yahweh now have a new king. David receives the anointing passively and silently. Nothing is said by David or to David. Samuel says nothing; the elders say nothing. The oil, however, does its work (v. 13). The oil binds Samuel (and Yahweh) in a firm loyalty to this shepherd boy who is to become king. The oil creates and identifies David as a proper subject for the "wind of God" (cf. 10:1, 10). Neither in terms of narrative presentation

nor in terms of theological intention is there anything to distinguish the anointing of David from that of Saul. The spirit comes mightily and David is empowered (v. 13). The meeting is ended. The story is ended. Samuel returns home.

Israel will never be the same again. This is a newness in Israel, not caused by oil but by spirit. It is a secret newness not yet known outside the circle of the family, or perhaps the village. The anointing is not a public relations event. It is a sacramental act binding Yahweh to this new vision of the kingdom. The narrative is placed at the very beginning of the David story. This anointing, in all its secrecy, will dominate the entire narrative of David's rise to power. Even though the main characters in the story will not know it, David is a man under an irreversible mission, on his way to triumph.

There is a central incongruity in the selection of David that is surely intended by the narrator. The one anointed is qualified by his "right heart." He needed nothing more. David's physical appearance, by Yahweh's stern standards, is irrelevant. Yet his appearance is given considerable attention. Perhaps his appearance is noted here in anticipation of the enormous attraction David is to have in the coming narratives for both men and women. Or perhaps his appearance is noted because those who valued the story most wanted to hear of his loveliness. The young David is one of the marginal people. He is uncredentialed and has no social claim to make. Those who fastened on to this story most passionately may have been those who, like David, were marginal with no credentials and no social claim. For such people it would be important to assert and celebrate that among the marginal there are beautiful people, that among the little ones there is the potential for greatness. In the hearing of the story are the seeds of hope for all those who joined the company and the narrated imagination of David.

The anointing plays no visible role in the next David episode (16:14–23). David, the reader, and the teller, however, know about this primordial act. That knowing is sufficient to shape reality differently. Samuel may have gone back to Ramah (v. 13), but the narrative is sent in more powerful directions than Ramah: toward Jerusalem, kingship, and power.

I Samuel 16:14–23

The initial anointing of David was a private, even secret, matter (vv. 1–3). Now it is time for David to become publicly visible. At the outset of his “reign,” David has only three constituents: Yahweh and Samuel, who are his relentless patrons, and Saul, who is to become a more ambiguous patron. He has been dealt with already by Yahweh (and Samuel); now it is Saul’s turn to deal with David.

There is a deep and intentional tension in the story of 16:14–23, requiring us to trace two story lines. Ostensibly this story is about Saul, Saul’s sickness and Saul’s source of health. But underneath that interest is the story of David’s road to power. Of this second story, Saul knows nothing. Conversely, David’s relentless road to power renders Saul (and the story line of Saul’s illness) fundamentally irrelevant and finally of no interest to the life and faith of Israel. How ironic that a story apparently featuring Saul is in fact interested in Saul only as a foil for David’s advance.

There are twin dangers in approaching the pathology of Saul. On the one hand, we can read his situation as though it were the result of a supernatural theological verdict without reference to the experiential reality of life. On the other hand, we can seek to banish such supernaturalism by reducing his ailment to psychology. We shall misunderstand, however, if we appropriate the sickness as mere theology or only psychology. Israel’s faith is much more embedded in living reality than to deal only with a theological conclusion. Conversely, the narrative itself guards against an absolute psychological assessment in verse 23. (The RSV does the interpreter a disservice through its translation of this section. In the RSV, “Spirit” is capitalized in v. 14 and is in lower case in v. 23, suggesting a theological and then a psychological reading. But that is only a translator’s inclination. In fact “the spirit” is the same at the beginning and at the end of the narrative, capitalized or not.)

Saul is indeed a disturbed man, and the disturbance has to do with alienation rooted in a theological disorder. The disorder must be seen, however, as both theological and psychological in order to understand the powerful ministration of David, who is Yahweh’s antidote for every ailment in Israel.

16:14–18. Saul’s problem is the visitation of an evil spirit (v. 15); the solution is healing music (v. 16). The problem is with Saul; the solution will be carried by David. It may trouble our positivistic minds that the disorder

of Saul is attributed to an evil spirit, and it may trouble us more that the evil spirit is credited to God. We must remember that the world of biblical perspective is a world without secondary cause. All causes are finally traced back to the God who causes all, who “kills and brings to life” (2:6). This narrative simply assumes that the world is ordered by the direct sovereign rule of God. All the spirits that beset human persons are dispatched from this single source (cf. I Kings 22:19–23).

Saul is eager to be healed (v. 17). He orders immediately that help be secured. He is an influential person entitled to the best health care available. Through verse 17 there are no surprises in this episode. We have an ordinary sequence of illness, diagnosis, prescription, and instruction to get available help. Yet, lingering not too far below the story line of Saul’s illness, the David story line already begins to assert itself. Saul’s imperative “provide” (see, *ra’ah*, v. 17) is the same word Yahweh used in referring to the choice of David (v. 1). David is “provided” by Yahweh and now is “provided” to Saul.

It is verse 18 that claims our attention. The speaker who answers Saul is too eager and knows too much. It is as though this character in the narrative has memorized his long line and is waiting for a chance to speak it. He “overnominates” David, who is overqualified for the job of musician. The royal appointment of a “therapist” must be well qualified. He must be skilled as a player, of “good presence,” and it is fortunate if God is with him (v. 18). David overpowers the job—and the narrative. In addition to those qualifications, David is brave, a man of war, a man of good speech. The narrator is obviously presenting David’s credentials for more than court musician.

The narrative invites us to wonder how it is that a member of Saul’s company should have ready a nominee from an obscure Judean village. Verses 1–13 provide the answer to our wonderment, however. The present availability of David is because of the secret anointing. The anointing will govern David’s story in the way the blessing governs Jacob’s story (Gen. 25:23) and as the dream governs the story of Joseph (Gen. 37:7–9).

16:19–23. The story turns decisively with the appearance of David. After the nominating speech of verse 18, Saul responds in verse 19. He calls David by name. Notice the servant had alluded to David but had not named him. Saul knows and speaks David’s name. David had been named by the

narrator in verse 13, but no character in the narrative has yet uttered his name. It is appropriate and compelling that Saul knows it and is the first to name him.

Moreover, Saul invites David into his court. Saul unwittingly summons the very one who now possesses the spirit and will in the end displace him. David is not an intruder. He does not force his way in but comes by royal invitation. Saul knows more than he should about David. He knows David is “with the sheep” (v. 19), a fact not announced in verse 18. We had known it in verse 11, but again Saul is privy to information not previously given him.

The relation between Saul and David is a positive one. “Saul loved him greatly” (v. 21). David is irresistible. Saul might have feared or resented David if he had known the end of the story. He knows only what he sees in David, however.

David’s ministry to Saul does all that Saul might have hoped. (The RSV translation of v. 23 is inadequate, because the text contains a double use of the word “spirit.” When David plays, not only does the evil spirit depart but the spirit comes to Saul. In the RSV this is rendered, “Saul was refreshed.”) Saul’s desperate concern was how to have the spirit of life available, rather than the evil spirit. The narrative makes clear that David makes the spirit of life available to Saul. Saul has life only because David mediates it to him. David is a life-giver, even to Saul!

I Samuel 17:1–58

We are now at David’s third point of entry into Israel’s narrative. Already he has been secretly anointed (16:1–13), and privately received by Saul (16:19–23). This story of David in chapter 17 is the best known of the David stories. Though the narrative may have had a complex prehistory, it now is a powerful, well-crafted narrative capable of sustaining our interest and imagination through its long telling. The story, deliberately paced, draws us slowly and steadily into the moment of high tension. It then resolves the tension quickly in the killing of the Philistine.

17:1–3. The Philistines still remain a threat to Israel. Saul’s mandate is precisely to cope with the Philistines, and it is the one thing he is unable to

do. These verses simply set the stage for the contrast to come, a contrast between the helpless Saul and the triumphant David.

17:4–11. The narrative moves a step closer to its dramatic confrontation. The Philistine threat is embodied in the person of Goliath. He is not called a giant in the fairy-tale sense that he is normally depicted in Sunday school literature, but he is indeed a very large man whose physical appearance sends shock waves through Israel. McCarter reckons him to be six feet nine inches, very tall for that culture. Israel should have learned by observing Saul not to be excessively impressed or intimidated by height, for Saul's height in fact meant very little (cf. 10:23). Indeed, Yahweh had learned, as Israel had not, that appearance does not really count (16:7). In the moment of danger, Israel is inordinately and inappropriately intimidated by “the giant.”

The narrator moves from describing Goliath's height (v. 4) to describing his armaments (vv. 5–7). The narrator is patient in giving us the details of this cumbersome armor (vv. 5–7). We are given a full inventory of helmet, coat of mail, greaves, javelin, and spear. Goliath is better armed than the writer of Ephesians could have imagined (Eph. 6:11–17)! Goliath did indeed have the whole armor, but it was not “the whole armor of God.”

Goliath's size and his awesome armor are matched by his bombast (vv. 8–11). Goliath is utterly sure of himself. The more he is self-assured, the more Israel is intimidated. Israel's intimidation results in its immobilization. Note that the narrator does not use adjectives like “strong,” “fierce,” or “bold” in describing Goliath. The reader, just like Saul and his troops, does not need to hear the adjectives to know what kind of warrior Goliath is. The narrative is so vivid that both reader and troops are “dismayed and greatly afraid” (v. 11) before the Philistine.

17:12–30. The narrative advances the contest another step. In the face of this awesome bully, armed to the teeth, comes David. He comes unobtrusively, the eighth son of a remote family. The family of Jesse is loyal to Saul's cause, having already placed three sons “in the service” (v. 13). The ones already given do not include David. He is too young to fight in battle. At home he is still tending sheep. David's menial task at home is matched by his menial task with the troops. He has the responsibility of

carrying food and supplies (vv. 17–18). This is a people’s militia; the army depends on the participation of all supporters, even the young ones.

David arrives in camp just as a battle is getting under way (v. 20). David is fascinated. He is so eager to see the battle and find out about it that he leaves his provisions with the baggage keeper (v. 22). It is tempting to find here a contrast between David, so eager for battle he checks things in the baggage department, and Saul, who preferred to hide in the baggage (10: 22). From the beginning David has a vitality never attributed to Saul.

David is present at the front when the Philistine repeats his taunt (v. 23). David has more than passing interest in the Philistine boaster. He is tantalized by the notion that whoever kills the Philistine will be honored in Israel (vv. 24–27). The others are too frightened and can neither think nor speak. David, by contrast, is not frightened. He is able to ask an innocent, embarrassing question: How dare the Philistine defy the armies of the living God? (v. 26). By his bold speech David introduces a new factor into the action: the “living God.” Israel, who faces the Philistine threat in fear and immobility, acts as if God were irrelevant to the battle. If God is irrelevant in the face of the Philistines, all is lost for the Israelites. But David will not have it so. For David it is unthinkable to assess a battle (or anything else) apart from the rule of the living God. The narrative has been arranged so that the weighty theological affirmation is placed in the mouth of David alone.

David is indeed the one “after Yahweh’s own heart” (13:14). David’s innocent question constitutes something of a reprimand to his brothers, and ultimately to Saul. He seems to ask not only “How dare he defy?” but “How can you let this mockery go unanswered?” David is engaged in a battle of rhetoric and of nerves. But we must not miss the theological turn in the narrative. David, knowing the true answer, poses the question to his fellows. Is there a living God in Israel? Is there a God who can, as Hannah sang, “give life and give death”? Is there a working power and a governance outside the scope of the armies that relativizes the power and danger noticed at first glance? David of course answers yes to his questions and is prepared to act “as if” it were so.

Israel does not yet seem ready to receive what David has to say and to offer, however. David is rebuked by his older brother Eliab (vv. 28–30) and is generally ignored and disregarded. His treatment by his brothers and their resentment of him is parallel to that of Joseph by his brothers (Gen. 39).

David's brothers have witnessed his anointing (16:13), but they do not recognize that he is the wave of the future. They wish to dismiss him to the margin of the narrative. Perhaps the secret anointing, if they remember it at all, only deepens their resentment toward him.

17:31–40. Finally David comes to Saul. This narrative shows no awareness of the meeting in 16:14–23. David must reestablish himself completely with Saul. David is summoned because Saul has heard David's bold, defiant question. Saul could not have known if David's words were flippant or serious, believing or smart-aleck. Saul is desperate and is grasping at straws. Or perhaps Saul can use a boost for morale. Saul is delighted if he can find a young person who still believes innocently in the dream of "God and country." Saul is pleased and curious that there is someone in this defeatist camp who will still genuinely use the rhetoric of the "living God."

An exchange between the two follows. David speaks first (v. 32). Saul is king and so we assume he will initiate the conversation. But in truth David is the anointed one. It is therefore appropriate that he speak first. Through this technique, the narrator demonstrates David's primacy over Saul. David's very first word, without elaboration, is a salvation oracle designed to overcome Saul's fear, an assurance of David's own presence and solidarity with Saul (v. 32). His second word is to volunteer to fight against the Philistine. The act of volunteering follows from the salvation oracle. On the basis of the assertion of solidarity, it is appropriate to offer to act in risky, decisive ways. It had been a long time since Saul had any such brave volunteer, but his initial response is to dismiss David as too young and inexperienced (v. 33).

David is prepared to counter Saul's hesitation (v. 33), however, with a speech. It is worth noticing that the narrator leads us into the battle between David and the Philistine through a sequence of well-crafted speeches. David speaks boldly to Saul of his experience and his qualification (cf. 16:18). He tells how, as a shepherd, he has protected his flock from "a lion, or a bear." He was able to deliver (*nšl*) the sheep from the attacking animals (v. 35). He would treat the Philistine just like one of those marauders he fearlessly destroyed. The powerful motivation for David's courage is that the Philistine has defied the "living God," the God of Israel, who must not be defied (v. 36). The speech blends youthful nerve and passionate faith.

In continuing his self-credentialing speech (v. 37), David makes his case on very different grounds. It is not that David killed the animals but that Yahweh delivered (*nšl*) David from the lion and the bear. David ceases to assert himself and bears witness to God. This God will now deliver David in the face of the Philistine. In the first part of the speech David has recited his own bravery (vv. 34–36). In the second part David acknowledges that Yahweh is the real rescuer (v. 37). In the two parts, David has used the same word, “deliver.” David delivered, Yahweh delivered, Yahweh will deliver. What is rhetorically most significant is that David has now named the name of Yahweh. Before this he has twice spoken of the “living God” (vv. 26, 36), but now he has said “Yahweh.”

No one else in the story has named the name of Yahweh. No doubt the narrator has intended it so. The others are cowards, because they have abandoned their only source of courage. David’s very different perception of the battle is theologically rooted. David does not doubt the old stories of Yahweh’s deliverance, because he has firsthand data concerning bears and lions. Yahweh does indeed deliver, and that makes the Philistine much less ominous. Quite a speech! Quite a young boy! Quite a faith, not found anywhere else in Israel!

Saul is persuaded (v. 37). He answers and now has courage also to utter the name of Yahweh. It is as though David has given Saul courage and faith to speak again of Yahweh. But Saul has not yet grasped the radicalness of David’s faith. Saul tries to accommodate David’s faith to the conventions of war (vv. 38–39a). Saul equips David with all the standard army gear. Israel had yearned to have a king in order to be “like the nations” (8:5, 20). In response to that request, they received Saul. And sure enough, Saul equipped for battle was just “like the nations,” just like the enemy, just like the Philistine, only not as good at it. Saul intends David to replicate Saul’s cowardly way. If David does that route, he will be only a poor ineffective imitation of the Philistine.

David refuses to be like Saul, however, or like the nations, or like the Philistine (v. 39b). David proposes a radical alternative, only five smooth stones (v. 40). David must have appeared to Saul (and to all the others) to be unarmed and defenseless. David’s alternative must have seemed to be no viable alternative at all. The narrator, however, permits no protest or reservation against David by Saul. David’s refusal of Saul’s armor is let stand as the last word. David’s confidence is in the “living God,” who has

delivered and who will deliver. Such faith is David's alternative to conventional modes of self-defense.

17:41–47. Finally, after forty verses, the protagonists meet. The storyteller has made us wait as long as possible for the confrontation. The wait has permitted the dramatic suspense to build. The contrast between the two sides could not be more complete. The Philistine sees David and disdains him, for he is young and good-looking (cf. 16:12). David is too handsome to be a hardened warrior. David looks like an innocent, inexperienced schoolboy. The Philistine is insulted by such a weak opponent, or pretends to be insulted (v. 43). It seems the Israelites have not bothered to take him seriously, for they have sent him no respectable adversary. Thus, the Philistine taunts the way a bully taunts, half inviting, half intimidating, conducting his own brand of psychological warfare, threatening to make the soon-to-be dead body of David available for any hungry bird (v. 44).

David is undaunted by the bombast of the Philistine. He responds to Goliath with his second compelling speech of the narrative (vv. 45–47). The first was to bear witness to Saul concerning his faith (vv. 34–37). Now David bears similar witness to the Philistine. David is again bold, full of faith, not intimidated, not unnerved. At the outset David states the contrast between the Philistine and himself as clearly and sharply as he can. The Philistine has sword, spear, and javelin—conventional arms. David has none of these. He has the powerful name of Yahweh of the troops, however, the God of the ranks of Israel (cf. Acts 3:6–7 on the power of the name). David knows the name. The name of Yahweh is here stated with all military implications: “the LORD of the troops, the God of the armies of Israel.” The phrasing means to allude to the entire memory of Yahweh's deliverances of Israel in the past. The specificity and remembered delivering actions of Yahweh are in contrast to the unnamed gods of the Philistines, by whom David is cursed (v. 43). David's speech is a positive witness to the power of the name of Yahweh. It is also a dread indictment of the Philistine “champion,” for it is Yahweh “whom you have defied” (v. 45).

The harsh consequences of that indictment are specified in verse 46. David answers the Philistine's threats with a series of first-person verbs: I will strike, I will cut off, I will give. These announced intentions are statements of what David will do, but they are embedded in two Yahwistic statements. At the beginning of the sequence, we read, “Yahweh will deliver

you into my hand” (v. 46). Everything David does is derivative from and permitted by this theological premise. At the conclusion we read that this is done “that all the earth may know ... and that all this assembly may know” that Israel has a God who saves (vv. 46b–47). The purpose of David’s victory is not simply to save Israel or to defeat the Philistines. The purpose is the glorification of Yahweh in the eyes of the world. The intent of the encounter is to make clear yet again that Yahweh “saves” (*yš’*), not with the conventions of human warfare but in Yahweh’s own inscrutable ways.

This is an extraordinary speech by David, with a disciplined and eloquent theological substance. David is the one who bears witness to the rule of Yahweh. In so doing he calls Israel away from its imitation of the nations and calls the nations away from their foolish defiance of Yahweh. In a quite general sense this is a “missionary speech,” summoning Israel and the nations to fresh faith in Yahweh.

17:48–51. The speeches are now ended. The Philistine has made his blustering claim. David has borne his powerful witness. Everything awaits the action. Everything depends on the deed. In the conflict of these two warriors, the great one and the little one, more is present than the struggle between two peoples and their armies and their futures. Also at risk are the claims of their two gods.

The action does not take very long. As is characteristic of Israel’s narrative art, the speeches are of more interest and importance than the action. The fight between the two is quick and completely dominated by David. We have waited for this confrontation for forty-seven verses, and it is over almost as soon as it begins.

The Philistine is never permitted to make a first move. He is completely outmaneuvered. David does exactly what he had said he would do in verse 46. He strikes the Philistine down and cuts off his head.

The verses reporting the actual battle are void of theological commentary or allusion. They stand in contrast to the preceding speeches, which were freighted with theological testimony. Now, in the actual battle, David stands alone with only his own courage and energy. An observer (who had not heard the speeches) would conclude that David in these verses has no extra resources at his disposal. But of course the outcome suggests that there were more resources available to David than an observer would notice. Only those who share the faith of David and who have heard his

confession would know that he has a massive resource beyond his own power that operates for him: namely, the powerful, faithful, living God of Israel.

17:52–58. After the actual defeat of the champion, the intensity of the story is quickly dissolved. The Philistines are routed (vv. 52–53). David retires from action (v. 54). At the end of the drama, David and Saul are still strangers. Saul has been desperately recruiting every able-bodied man he can find (cf. 14:52). It is clear that he wants this heroic young man on his side, but neither Saul nor his commander, Abner, know David's identity (vv. 55–56). It is odd, of course, that the decisive battle has been won by a stranger, but this is the shape of David's strange way in Saul's court. He is indeed a stranger there.

Finally, when David is summoned by Abner and meets Saul (vv. 57–58), Saul must inquire about David's identity (v. 58). David's answer is adequate and respectful, but it is less than forthcoming. David identifies his family, but he will not give his own name. It is as though he intends to withhold what is most precious from the king whom he will serve and eventually displace. This odd posture assumed by David is nicely contrasted with 16:18–19. There Saul is told of one unnamed "son of Jesse," and Saul responds, "Send in David." There Saul knows David's name. Here, by contrast, Saul receives this "son of Jesse" but receives no response about his name. Saul will know David's awesome name soon enough (cf. 18:7). But not yet.

Chapter 17 needs to be read with at least three dimensions of dramatic tension in view. At the first level, there is the contest between David and the Philistine. This is resolved in David's favor. Second, there is the coy and careful maneuvering of David vis-à-vis Saul. This tension is not yet resolved and has only just begun. Third, there is the theological tension, not just the tension between the power of Yahweh and the power of the Philistine gods but, at least as significant, the tension between the bold faith of David and the timid faith of Saul and his troops. Both these tensions are resolved in favor of David and Yahweh. Now it is known there is a God in Israel who must be reckoned with, by the nations but also by Israel itself (v. 46).

The story functions as the third and final introduction of David into the court and arena of Saul. The story is also set as a paradigm of bold faith in

an arena of fear, threat, and defiance. David stakes his life on the power of Yahweh. Israel recites this story of Yahweh's rescue (and others like it) each time it wants to mobilize or draw near to that same delivering power. In the life of Israel, the telling of the story is the way the power of Yahweh becomes again available in each new present circumstance.

The certitude with which David speaks to Saul (vv. 34–37) and to Goliath (vv. 45–47) about the past is shown to be true in the present. There *is* a God in Israel, a living God, who will deliver. The claim has been tested and validated in a concrete way. This is indeed an evangelical narrative, bearing witness to the vitality and authority of this God before whom even Philistines must yield (cf. 6:6).

I Samuel 18—20

David in Saul's Court

I Samuel 18:1–30

The beginning of the narrative of the rise of David in chapters 16 and 17 has taken great care with the introduction of David into the troubled and unresolved world of Saul. David has been secretly anointed (16:12–13), welcomed as a healing musician (16:22–23), and recruited as an effective, albeit unconventional, warrior (17:31). When we arrive at chapter 18, David is present in Saul's world in all his attractiveness, ambiguity, danger, and power. Chapter 18 contains little narrative action but characterizes the relations David has with the various forces in the world of Saul. Both McCarter and Klein include verses 1–5 as a part of the preceding literary unit (ch. 17); thematically, however, these verses seem to belong in the context of chapter 18.

This chapter narrates the way in which David became established as a popular, beloved, and therefore threatening member of Saul's court. We may identify two sets of relationships in this collection of smaller literary units.

First, David's relation with three of Saul's children is reported, concerning Jonathan (vv. 1–5), Merab (vv. 17–19), and Michal (vv. 20–29). In the cases of Jonathan and Michal, we are told that David was "loved" by both of them (vv. 1, 20). The third case (Merab) is an unresolved oddity in the chapter that does not greatly illuminate the rise of David. The fact that Merab is withheld from David may indicate Saul's resistance to David's further access to the court.

Second, David is reported as a successful and popular figure in the public eye. He is celebrated and saluted by the women as a much honored military hero (vv. 6–16), and he is said to have great and consistent military "success" (vv. 5, 30).

On both counts of personal intimacy with Saul's family and in public appeal, David is indeed "on the rise." These various reports are a

vindication of the judgment that the “Lord was with him” (vv. 12, 14, 28; cf. 16:18). He is “loved” by Israel and Judah (vv. 16, 28) and said to be loved by Saul’s servants (v. 22), as well as by Jonathan and Michal.

The counterpart to David’s success, popularity, and affection is Saul’s deep and growing hostility (vv. 11, 25). The enormous popularity of David on all these fronts calls attention to and intensifies this pivotal, troubled relation between David and Saul. This vexed relation becomes the focus of the ongoing narrative. The Lord and many others may be with David. Saul is firmly set against him.

18:1–5. Jonathan was a popular heroic figure in Israel (see his earlier presence in the narrative in 13:13—14:46). In his daring escapade against the Philistines, popular opinion forced Saul to violate his own religious scruples in order to save Jonathan (14:45). At this first meeting, Jonathan and David are immediately bound together, life to life. (The RSV says their lives were “knit.”) Ackroyd observes that the term *qšr* is a carefully ambiguous word that means not only “bound” but also suggests “conspiracy.” Even if the new friendship of David and Jonathan is not intentionally conspiratorial, Saul will soon perceive it as such (20:30–31). Jonathan “loved” David (vv. 1, 3) and made a covenant with him (v. 3). (Notice earlier [16:21] Saul had loved David, but by 18:22 such a claim is only a device for destroying David.) The term “love” may refer to both an emotional attraction and a political commitment. The action of Jonathan in giving David his robe and armor is a dramatic act that seems to transfer to David Jonathan’s right to claim the throne (v. 4).

18:6–16. The narrator reflects here on David’s enormous popularity and the vexation his popularity causes Saul. Saul and his company are now returning home in triumph from the defeat of “the Philistines” (v. 6; cf. ch. 17). It is for Saul, as for David, a great homecoming. The two have different roles—Saul as the commander, David as the warrior. The triumph belongs to both of them. There is no reason to imagine tension or competition between them.

As happens on such a public occasion, a new celebrative song emerges saluting both Saul and David (v. 7). It is probable that the song, which was about “thousands” and “ten thousands,” simply used two words meaning “many.” It is likely that the song intends to celebrate Saul and David

equally for an equal achievement. In victory there is no need for destructive comparison. There is enough joy for both to share fully.

Saul, however, hears the song through his jealousy, because David is celebrated either as his equal or as his superior (v. 8). Encouraged by the extravagant acclaim of David, Saul begins to perceive David as a threat and competitor (v. 9). Saul interprets everything about David through the prism of this deep, debilitating suspicion. In his fearfulness Saul concludes that David already has all that Saul can give him—except the kingdom (v. 8). Saul seems to have discerned in some inchoate way that the purpose of David's presence in his court is eventually to seize the throne.

Of course the reception of the throne by David is intended by Yahweh. Thus far, however, that intent of Yahweh, signaled in the anointing, is a well-guarded secret. Only Samuel (who is not present in this narrative), the narrator, and the readers know that David is destined for the throne. As yet, Saul has no clue of Yahweh's resolve for David. Saul is frightened enough and suspicious enough to see what others cannot see. On his own terms and through his own prism of fear, Saul also sees David's future.

There is keen irony in the fact that the fearful discernment of Saul and the grand intent of Yahweh converge in seeing David destined for royal power. Saul has it right, but for all the wrong reasons. Saul knows more than he understands, for he sees David only as ambitious, not as destined. He imagines that David is driven only by temptation. Saul knows nothing of the will of Yahweh, which has already decreed David's rise and Saul's eventual failure.

Saul understands everything except the powerful resolve of Yahweh—which means Saul understands nothing at all, except his own pitiful jeopardy. Saul perceives that jeopardy to be instigated by David; the narrative, however, makes evident that Saul is endangered not by the ambition of David but by the hidden purpose of Yahweh. What Saul perceives only as a threatening possibility, to be avoided by careful stratagem, we know to be an assured outcome that cannot be avoided. It is this tension between a feared possibility and an assured outcome that creates the powerful irony of the text. The irony means that Saul is fated to struggle against the rise of David but he cannot in the end succeed.

Saul's response to this rich irony in which he is enmeshed is a response of poison and pain (vv. 10–11). Failing to understand his true situation, Saul is placed in an impossible circumstance. David drives Saul wild, but only

David can soothe Saul. Saul is left with an endless cycle of rage and comfort, wherein the comforter evokes more rage, which requires fresh comfort. Given this no-win circumstance, Saul is driven to bold stratagems in an attempt either to remove David from his presence (v. 13) or to eliminate him altogether (vv. 12–25).

In his desperation Saul terminates David's duty as a court player and sends him into the field, so that David will not be a constant, vexing presence in court (v. 13). Saul's plan works exactly contrary to his hope. David's more public duty in the field only makes him more visible, more popular with the people, and therefore more troublesome to Saul (vv. 14–16). In verse 7 the women celebrate both Saul and David; in verse 16 we are told that Israel and Judah "love David." Saul works against God's inexorable purpose for David. For that reason Saul's every effort yields a consequence he cannot intend or anticipate. Throughout the narrative David is the one for whom "all things work together for good" (cf. Rom. 8:28). Conversely, nothing works "for good" for Saul.

18:17–19. Saul's second stratagem for the removal of David is to marry him to his daughter Merab. The proposed marriage, however, is only a pretext to send David more heroically and more dangerously into battle, perhaps to be killed by the Philistines (v. 17). David does not question Saul's motivation but humbly denies his qualification for such a high marriage (v. 18). The curious turn of the narrative, however, is that the marriage offered without explanation is also withdrawn without explanation (v. 19). The offer and withdrawal perhaps reflect Saul's instability and his inability to think clearly or plan coherently in his rage. Or perhaps this proposed marriage is defeated because it clashes with the overriding purpose of Yahweh. The narrative engages in no reflection; it simply reports the outcome.

It is worth noting that the strategy of the marriage sounds strangely anticipatory of David's successful disposal of Uriah (II Sam. 11:4–17). Even in such a dastardly undertaking, David can succeed in ways in which Saul cannot. In any event, the entire scheme of the proposed marriage comes to nothing and does not change the situation of the narrative. In the next episode (vv. 20–29), the marriage of David to Saul's second daughter is effected. Even this marriage will work to David's advantage and to Saul's disadvantage (cf. 19:11–17). Saul cannot prevail against David.

18:20–30. The second report of an offer of a daughter by Saul—this time Michal—is a very different matter. The Michal connection has a future in the David story. Michal, like Jonathan, “loved” David (v. 20). We are taken inside Saul’s shrewd reasoning by the narrator. We are not told in verses 17–19 how a marriage would increase David’s risk in battle. In this case, however, the intended risk at the hands of the Philistines is spelled out (v. 21). David appropriately and modestly announces himself unworthy of marriage to the king’s daughter (see also v. 18). Such an act of abasement plays well into Saul’s scheme. It permits Saul to drive a higher bargain and ask a higher price. Saul responds to David with a requirement that the bride’s price must be one hundred Philistine foreskins (v. 25). David must kill a hundred Philistines, a project which entails great risk. This requirement might have deterred a lesser man, or at least suggested an ulterior motive on Saul’s part. But David is ostensibly innocent, eager, and beyond fear. The requirement “pleased” him (v. 26).

David acted promptly and well ahead of the deadline (which must have been set, though we are not told of it). Verse 26 suggests that a time limit had been set before which David needed to produce the foreskins. David brings the required booty. Indeed, David brings two hundred foreskins, twice the required number (v. 27)! Saul keeps his word and the marriage is enacted. Surrounding this marriage is a great darkness of fear and destructiveness. Saul’s plan to destroy David by his Philistine stratagem has failed, and Saul has left himself even more vulnerable. David is now his son-in-law, with visible entitlement to power, ensconced in the royal establishment. David’s entitlement goes hand in hand with popular acclaim (v. 15) and with the commitment of Jonathan to David (vv. 1–3).

Chapter 18 is an exceedingly skillful mapping of Saul’s increasingly hopeless situation. The narrative weaves together the public dimensions of that hopelessness (embodied in the women’s singing songs for David [v. 7], and the adoring people, [vv. 16, 28]), and the private dimensions of that hopelessness (the personal attachments of Jonathan [vv. 1, 3] and Michal [v. 20] to David). Saul is a remarkably isolated man by the end of this chapter. He sees clearly that momentum has slipped from his hand. He is helpless to turn the flow of power and vitality back in his own favor.

Several aspects of the careful balance of rhetoric in chapter 18 warrant our attention. First, the word “love,” which here surely refers both to personal attachment and public commitment, is used of Jonathan (vv. 1, 3),

of all Israel and Judah (v. 16; cf. vv. 22,28), and of Michal (v. 20). The term runs like a guiding thread throughout this chapter and cannot be accidental. Second, at the beginning (v. 5), in the middle (v. 15), and at the end (v. 30) of the narrative it is affirmed that David has “success” in everything. Third, we are told twice that “the LORD was with him” (vv. 12, 14), and finally even Saul sees and knows that the Lord is with David (v. 28). The convergence of “the LORD was with him” and “success” is closely reminiscent of the Joseph story (Gen. 39: 2, 3, 23). Both David and Joseph are presented as benefactors of an initial commitment on God’s part before which the historical process must eventually yield.

The narrator builds the case on behalf of David against Saul slowly and carefully, to show that on every front God is keeping the promise to give the kingdom to this one “after his own heart” (13:14). In this account David takes no initiatives. He does not assert himself or express any ambition. He only receives what is given. (In the language of Gunn [1975], it is all “gift,” without “grasping.”) David has received the submission of Jonathan, Saul’s heir apparent. He is married to the king’s daughter who loves him, which gives him legitimacy. He is the hero of the public. A new history has begun in this man by the power of God. The Goliath defeat is a factor in David’s rise, but it is not a sufficient explanation for his enormous success and popularity. The only explanation is that it is the Lord’s doing. Even Saul in his pathology can see this (v. 28). Saul is not yet ready to yield, but he already knows.

The narrator, in his careful and discerning way, wants us to see at least as much as Saul sees. We are invited to watch while history works its relentless way toward God’s intention. History is not a blind force or an act of sheer power. There is a purpose at work that regularly astonishes us. It is a power that disrupts and heals. David is now carried on the wave of this purpose. The ones who trust the story ride atop this flow of history with David. They ride there with David every time they tell or hear the story. The others, like Saul, either die or go mad.

I Samuel 19:1–24

The focus in chapter 19 is of course on David. The great issue on which we are invited to reflect, however, is the contest between the relentless will

of Yahweh and the diseased but powerful will of Saul. Yahweh will have David be king. That is the hidden hope of the narrative. Saul will have David destroyed, for the sake of his own throne (and for the sake of his own peace of mind). To the narrator, and therefore to us, this appears to be a quite uneven contest, for what is Saul in such a dispute? The matter is very different for the participants in the story, however, because none of the participants knows that Saul's protagonist is really Yahweh. Least of all does Saul recognize this. To an ordinary observer who does not, like us, have this privileged narrator to interpret and anticipate, the drama appears simply to be a deathly conflict over power between a king and his best warrior.

The biblical narrative characteristically dares to assert, however, that there is purpose in the midst of power. It is this purpose in the midst of power to which David is willing to entrust himself, which Saul will not notice and cannot acknowledge.

In this chapter the programmatic theme is stated clearly in verse 1. Saul has determined that David is a threat that cannot be tolerated. This determination is an advance beyond Saul's cunning in chapter 18. There Saul tried to move unnoticed in his attack on David. Now Saul does not care who notices. Saul is desperate. His desperation, however, is always countered by the resolve of Yahweh.

19:1–7. Saul has announced his fearful intention (v. 1), but the text immediately confronts us with the sharpest contrast possible. The one whom Saul plans to kill is the one in whom Jonathan “delights” (v. 1). Jonathan should have been in solidarity with his father, if not out of duty, then out of self-interest (for the sake of his own chance at the throne). The narrative, however, presents Jonathan acting against both his duty and his self-interest.

Jonathan sets a modest intrigue with David against his father (vv. 2–3). Jonathan lets David know before the fact that he will intervene with Saul. He does more than he promises David. At great risk to himself, Jonathan becomes David's powerful advocate in the face of Saul (vv. 4–5). Jonathan makes a case to his father that David has not only been bold and courageous but has acted in loyalty to Saul. Jonathan particularly alludes to “the Philistine” of chapter 17. He reminds Saul of Saul's own joy in David's defeat of the Philistine. On the basis of that event alone, Jonathan asks his

father sharply why he would kill David and be responsible for the murder. Saul is (for now) persuaded by Jonathan's powerful argument. Saul promises not to kill David (v. 6). In the end, David is restored to Saul's court (v. 7).

19:8–10. Jonathan's persuasiveness and David's well-being are short-lived, however. David has another military success against the Philistines (v. 8). Again Saul should have been delighted, for any Philistine defeat makes his own throne more secure. The success of David, however, rankles more than defeat of the Philistines delights. Saul is so obsessed with David he abandons all good judgment concerning the well-being of his own rule. Again it is an "evil spirit" dispatched by Yahweh (v. 9) who leads Saul to act in contradiction to his recent pledge to honor David. (Notice Saul's pledge to spare David in v. 6. Saul seems to have less trouble scuttling this kind of oath for life than he did the oath for death in 14:24, 44. Saul selects his oaths as he pleases.)

Perhaps to speak of "an evil spirit" is the only way ancient Israel had to comment on an emotional illness. But we should not miss the poignancy of the theological reference. The phrasing is not without analogy to the report that "Yahweh had hardened the heart of Pharaoh" (e.g., Ex. 11:10). In the theologically uncomplicated world of Israel, Yahweh not only prospers those who are favored but works for their well-being by pressing their adversaries to more foolish and more self-destructive acts.

In 18:11 Saul contemplated a personal attack on David, but David "evaded him twice." What Saul wanted to do in 18:11 ("pin David to the wall") he actively pursues in verses 9–10. Saul's spear ends up in the wall instead of in David, however, for once again David is able to elude Saul and his murderous attack. David is still at large and Saul is freshly vulnerable, now exposed as a ruthless, frightened man who is incapable of good judgment. There is no reason to think that Saul's positive vow in verse 6 was made in bad faith. Saul did not lie to his son. Saul is, however, by the work of the spirit, an unstable person. His moods of generosity and despair are deep and incongruous.

The bearer of God's future is now a hunted man, sought by the king. David is thus far in the narrative completely passive. He takes no initiatives, nor are we told of his responses to Saul. The narrative simply gives room for the venom of Saul to have its full, self-destructive play.

19:11–17. Saul can now think of nothing except the threat of David. His preoccupation is not unlike Lyndon Johnson’s reported preoccupation with “the Kennedys.” Saul resolves to kill David as soon as he comes out of his house in the morning (v. 11a). Saul’s action here contains a powerful echo of his instructions in verse 1. The stories of verses 1–6 and 11–17 both begin with Saul’s bold resolve to kill David. In verse 1, Saul’s resolve is disrupted by the phrase “But Jonathan.” In verse 11, it is disrupted by the phrase “But Michal.” Saul’s immediate problem is the powerful intervention of his own children, first his son and then his daughter, who thwart him. In verses 2–7, Jonathan had been direct with Saul and persuasive in his rhetoric. Michal, by contrast, is devious and indirect but equally effective.

Even in his desperate escape through a window (v. 12), David takes no initiative to save himself. It is Michal who initiates the action (v. 11b); she lets him out the window so that he escapes from the guards posted by Saul. Moreover, it is Michal who constructs the elaborate subterfuge to give David time to escape (v. 13). She reports that David is sick (v. 14). Saul is so desperate, so frightened, and so angry that he is prepared to kill a sick man while he has his chance (v. 15).

When the messengers arrive, they discover what the reader already knows: David is not there. A dummy made to look like David is in the bed, a dummy, ironically enough, constructed of household gods (v. 16). At least they are useful for something in this Yahwistic account! Only then does the father speak to his daughter (v. 17). Only then do we hear the pathos in Saul’s voice. “Why have you deceived me thus and let my enemy go?” Saul’s pathos, however, is not enough to compel Michal’s honest respect. Michal dissembles once more. She declares that she helped David escape because David threatened her. At least Saul can retain the fiction of his self-respect as the father of this daughter. Only we and the narrator know better. Saul is so pitiful that he dare not know the truth. Only we know that the daughter has fully betrayed her father for the David whom she loves (18:2), whom Saul hates.

We seem to be reading a dime-store novel or watching a seedy soap opera. There is nothing here of God or God’s will or God’s coming kingdom. We are treated to calculating human actions that do not conform to our expectations. Something is deeply awry when a future king must crawl through a window, when the wife of a coming king must lie to the

father who is still king. The evil spirit of Saul has infected the whole scene. Saul has let David escape. Now Saul is alone with the demon, without the object of his intense hate. Through his obsession with David, Saul has lost a son and now a daughter.

19:18–24. There is yet a fourth escape. This escape is not by the son or by the daughter or even directly from the king's hand, as in verses 9–10. This escape is even more dramatic. In an episode that is a curious intrusion in the narrative, David flees to Ramah. The purpose apparently is to identify David with Samuel publicly. The narrator wants to create yet another element in the legitimacy of David and does so by linking David to the powerful kingmaker. As the narrative presents it, David comes to Samuel. David tells Samuel about Saul's behavior (v. 18). We are not told Samuel's response. Surely Samuel knew enough not to be surprised.

Saul has a powerful intelligence network. It does not take Saul long to locate the fugitive (v. 19). Saul tries once again to seize David (v. 20). Samuel, however, is utterly committed to David, and he is prepared to do what he must to end the sour failure that is Saul. There is also more at work here, so the narrator tells us, than David and Samuel. The spirit of God is at work on David's behalf.

The first wave of Saul's men comes to arrest David (v. 20). They are caught up in the power of the spirit, however, and forget about their mandate to arrest David. The power of the spirit protects him. A second group of Saul's men is sent, and the second group is also preempted by the spirit (v. 21a). A third group comes, but the same happens to that group (v. 21b).

The narrative builds in dramatic power by the thrice-repeated statement about messengers arriving who are grasped by the spirit and who prophesy. The actual phenomenon of prophecy is not clearly delineated here. Apparently "prophecy" refers to some kind of ecstatic experience that causes the messengers to break out of normal, acceptable patterns of behavior and engage in frenzied or eccentric conduct not expected of the king's servants (cf. 10:9–10). This behavior is understood to be caused by the invasive, compelling power of God, who shatters all conventional categories of perception and conduct. The messengers are completely available for the celebration of and communion with God's spirit. The practical effect of the experience is to cause the messengers to desist from

their mission of apprehending David, so that this odd experience in fact rescues him. The narrative suggests that God's transformative spirit is peculiarly allied with and attentive to David. Before that compelling, inscrutable, inexplicable power, Saul is helpless.

Finally, in exasperation, Saul himself comes to Ramah (v. 22). Saul has learned that if he wants something done right he must do it himself. He inquires where Samuel and David are, as the messengers before him must have inquired (v. 22), and comes to Naioth where they are (v. 23). Now Saul is finally face to face with David, ready to kill him. We are not surprised by what happens next. Like the messengers before him, Saul is seized, seized by the spirit of God, who is allied with David and who perhaps is responsive to the rule of Samuel. Saul is seized powerfully. Saul strips off his clothes. He lies before Samuel all day and all night. The pitifully embarrassing scene is that of this once great man, still tall but no longer great, exhausted by demanding religious exercise (cf. v. 24), clearly not in control, shamed, now rendered powerless in a posture of submissiveness. This episode is an act of dramatic de-legitimation of Saul.

It is helpful to compare this scene with 10:9–10. We do not have any access to the psychological phenomenon of these scenes, even though scholars continue to probe such matters. What is probably most important in these two episodes is their literary placement and the place they have in the larger narrative. What is obvious and surely intentional is that 10:9–13 is placed at the very beginning of Saul's career, when he has been anointed and authorized as king. The rush of the spirit so evident then was taken affirmatively to assert that Saul is indeed energized and authorized by God's power, which is larger than himself.

Conversely, in chapter 19 Saul is presented as the would-be killer of God's chosen. The second episode with the spirit signals the end of Saul's career. That career will be awhile winding down, but the narrator wants us to see that Saul is, in fact, finished. He is shown to be an unreliable character, out of control and, by the end of this episode, out of power and authority. Thus the movement from 10:9–13 to 19:18–24 is from a beginning experience of being possessed by the massive power of God to an end experience of the same massive possession.

The two episodes bracket and define the tension between Saul and David. In our exposition of 10:9–13, we noted that Saul was "an unstable personality," peculiarly available for God's guidance. At the end, Saul is

even more an unstable personality, but now so consumed by his fear that he is no longer at all available for guidance. In both cases people asked, “Is Saul among the prophets?” (10:12; 19:24). The question, however, can be asked in two very different tones of voice. In the first incident the question can be asked with expectancy, suggesting this surprising king, now strongly authorized by the spirit, will go beyond himself in obedience to Yahweh. At the end the same question can be asked in head-shaking pity, concerning a king who has in fact abdicated his legitimacy through his consuming hate.

There is surprisingly little about David in this chapter, except to note that he has powerful friends (Jonathan, Michal, Samuel), that he is very “lucky,” and that he is prospering. David still remains in the background, responsive but not yet proactive. Most attention in this chapter is focused on Saul. Indeed, before our very eyes, the narrator diminishes, depreciates, and finally destroys Saul, episode by episode. All that is left, when the narrator completes the dismantling, is an empty shell of hate, no longer a king. Saul is portrayed as finished with power, legitimacy, and authority long before his death.

I Samuel 20:1–23

Two themes now familiar to us converge in this unit. The first is the friendship of Jonathan and David. We have already seen that Jonathan “loved” David, that he had already dramatically ceded his claim to power over to David (18:4), and that he sided with David against his father (and against his own self-interest). In chapter 20 it becomes clear that the love of Jonathan and David has political implications for the future, as well as dimensions of personal intimacy. The second theme concerns David’s legitimate fear of Saul’s madness and his flight for his life. Through the extended narrative of chapter 20, David’s posture is consistently and necessarily one of flight. The two themes of Jonathan’s love for David and David’s fear of Saul both witness to the hidden resolve of Yahweh that Saul should decrease and David should increase.

The long first section of the chapter is an extended conversation between the two friends in which the stakes are very high. Both David and Jonathan now understand that the danger to David is very real.

20:1–11. In verse 1 David places his case before Jonathan, asking what his guilt is that Saul should seek to kill him. In verse 8 David asserts that if he is guilty, he would rather die at the hand of Jonathan. Both times Jonathan answers “Far from it” or, better, “God forbid” (vv. 2, 9). In both cases David poses the hypothetical possibility of his being guilty, and each time Jonathan rejects those categories of analysis.

Jonathan will not entertain the notion that David might be guilty. Through the mouth of Jonathan, the narrative takes care to assert the complete innocence of David. David has done no wrong against Saul. The fault is all on the side of Saul. At one and the same time, the narrative wants to affirm two matters that live in profound tension. On the one hand, Saul is at fault and held accountable. On the other hand, it is the work of the evil spirit that causes Saul to act in such destructive ways. The narrative does not sort out this contradiction. Indeed the interplay of these factors gives the narrative its odd vitality.

David proposes a plan to find out Saul’s intention for him (vv. 5–8). He proposes intentionally to miss a royal dinner, one at which he should be present. Saul will surely note his absence. This will provide yet another opportunity to find out how determined Saul is to kill David. Jonathan joins David in deceiving Saul. Either Saul will gladly accept David’s excuse of going to Bethlehem for a sacrifice (a lie reminiscent of Samuel in I Sam. 16:1–13), or Saul will be angry and allow no excuse. Although Saul’s past actions seem to leave little doubt as to how he will react, the narrative leaves open the chance that in this new confrontation Saul may be otherwise disposed toward David. The narrative leaves open the struggle between the will of Saul and the power of the “evil spirit” that commandeers Saul’s will.

David makes a direct appeal to Jonathan on the basis of their friendship (v. 8). David reminds Jonathan that he is bound to David in covenant (cf. 18:3) and asks Jonathan to deal with him in terms of *hesed*—that is, in terms of covenant fidelity (Sakenfeld, pp. 7–16). It is as though David fears that Jonathan might be persuaded or intimidated by Saul to abandon his covenant oath to David. If Jonathan joined Saul against David, then the situation would be extremely dangerous for David. Jonathan reassures David that the ties of friendship and covenant in this case supersede family ties (v. 9). Almost as an afterthought, David wonders how he will receive word from Jonathan, either of warning or of reassurance, according to Saul’s response to his absence (v. 10).

The conversation continues “in the field” (v. 11), perhaps to avoid being overheard. The conversation now includes two very different materials.

20:12–17. The less playful and more earnest material is in these verses. Jonathan promises to give an honest and reliable message to David (12–13a). Then we are introduced to a very different mode of discourse (13b–17). Jonathan seems to be appealing to a coming change in royal houses when he asserts, “May Yahweh be with you, as he has been with my father” (v. 13b). The speech is constructed so that Jonathan and not David is now the one in danger. Jonathan uses the term *hesed* twice, first asking loyalty toward his person (v. 14) and then asking loyal love toward his heirs (v. 15). Three times the speech uses the term “cut off.” First it is a petition not to cut off covenant loyalty (v. 15a). Second it is a recognition that all of David’s enemies will be cut off by Yahweh, and this will surely include Saul (v. 15b). Third it is a petition that the name and house of Jonathan not be cut off along with the name and house of Saul, which deserves to be cut off (v. 16). This part of the chapter looks far ahead in the narrative with great historical and theological intentionality.

This is a remarkable speech placed in the mouth of Jonathan. In the immediate present, David’s life is in jeopardy. In this speech, which takes the long view, however, it is as though the danger to David has evaporated and Jonathan is now the one in danger. It is as though the narrative completely disregards present realities and anticipates a future in which everything is different. In that anticipated future, David is established and Saul’s house and heirs are in grave danger. Jonathan (and the narrative) knows that Yahweh is at work to secure David and to destroy David’s enemies. Jonathan knows very well who David’s primary enemy is. It is his own father, and so he and his heirs will be at risk when the harsh resolution is made between Saul and David. Specifically, there will be a hunting down and wiping out of the threats that may still come from the house of Saul.

The scenario feared by Jonathan here is exactly what happens later in II Samuel 3–4; 9, when David is secure and Saul and his company are shamed losers. Yahweh (and David) is ruthless. Our unit (vv. 15–16) thus is a deliberate narrative allusion to II Samuel 9:1, in which David is said to ask, “Is there still any one left of the house of Saul, that I may show him *hesed* for Jonathan’s sake?” When the pitiful, handicapped son of Jonathan is brought, David assures him, “Do not fear; for I will show you *hesed* for the

sake of your father Jonathan” (II Sam. 9:7). This one son of Jonathan is an exception to the general harsh elimination of the Saul party. When our story is linked to II Samuel 9, we are able to see that (a) Jonathan was right to be anxious for the well-being of his heirs, (b) David is indeed a man of *hesed*, and, most important, (c) Jonathan was correct in his estimation that the flow of power had turned and David was to succeed and be the wave of the future. David is to be a very harsh winner, but one who will honor his specific commitments and pay his debts.

The narrator’s conclusion in verse 17 is telling. This one verse employs the word “love” three times. David swears by his *love* for Jonathan, for David *loved* Jonathan, as David *loved* David’s own life. David is utterly committed to Jonathan, and this love will survive in the face of David’s vengeance against Saul and in his drive to secure his crown. This love on David’s part may indeed be an impressive example of the commandment of Leviticus 19:18 to love neighbor as you love self. David loves his neighbor (Jonathan) as he loves his own life. That deep commitment to Jonathan is decisive for the future.

Verses 12–17 form an odd, intrusive unit, which seems to anticipate the future and to bind this narrative to later ones in II Samuel 9 and following. The verses put us on notice that these interesting narratives have indeed set their face toward Jerusalem (cf. Luke 9:51). We are watching while David comes to full power. Jonathan is the voice of that sure future, already opening in the present. The narrative manages to hold together the playful story of secret communication (vv. 1–11, 18–23) with quite serious covenantal theology (vv. 12–17).

These verses digress from the immediate crisis of coping with the murderous Saul. Here, Saul is no significant presence. It is the future of this friendship rooted in covenant that matters. By Saul’s absence, the narrative asserts that Saul is irrelevant to the future toward which both David and Jonathan look. David is a man of loyalty and will honor his commitment to Jonathan. That leaves the future secure.

20:18–23. Jonathan’s rather elaborate (and, as it turns out, unnecessary) scheme for communication with David (vv. 18–22) is an interesting dramatic ploy, but the shooting of the arrows is irrelevant to the plot. What counts is the instruction that Jonathan will shout to his lad. The stratagem to

signal to David is used to assert that David's safety is the concern of the Lord (v. 22).

Jonathan is an effective interpreter and advocate of the coming Davidic monarchy. Jonathan desires Yahweh to be with David (v. 13). Jonathan expresses the hope that Yahweh will avenge the enemies of David (v. 16). Jonathan knows that, if David flees, Yahweh has sent him away to safety (v. 22). Finally, and most important for Jonathan, he asserts to David that they are indeed bound together (v. 23): "The LORD is between you and me for ever." This is a covenant Yahweh guarantees. Jonathan's is the voice that gives a completely Yahwistic reading to David's future. David does not answer Jonathan, but clearly he assents to this reading of reality.

I Samuel 20:24–34

Now the narrative takes us back to the present reality of Saul's intense anger. David begins to implement the scheme he devised with Jonathan; he hides when he is expected to be at the king's table (v. 24).

20:24–29. Verse 25 places us at the king's table, where the die for David's future is to be cast yet again. The principals are all present: Saul, Jonathan, Abner—all but David. "David's place was empty" (v. 25). Saul said nothing. Did Saul not notice? Yes, he noticed the absence, but he supposed David was not prepared to come to the table because of ritual disqualification (v. 26). That is an acceptable excuse, once.

The second day, however, the narrator reiterates, "David's place was empty" (v. 27). Saul inquires about David but will not begin to speak David's dread-filled name. He asks only of "the son of Jesse." Jonathan answers his father with his long prepared reply in which he speaks David's name (vv. 28–29). It is worth noting that Jonathan asserts authority for himself, an authority that properly belonged only to Saul. David "asked leave of me" (v. 28). Was this preemption of authority on Jonathan's part a threat to Saul? Is Jonathan authorized to excuse people from Saul's table?

20:30–34. The narrative turns with electrifying violence in verse 30. The scene has appeared to be a pleasant dinner conversation about a missing member of the court who went to a family feast. It takes almost nothing to set Saul off when the subject is David. Not for a minute does Saul believe

Jonathan's ruse. Not for an instant must Saul puzzle or ponder. Saul's madness has caused him to see with deep and immediate clarity. It is a conspiracy! Saul now comes to recognize the darker implications of the word "knit" (*qšr*) in 18:1.

Saul's rage is not first against David but against the closer target, Jonathan. Saul is not surprised or deceived by the subterfuge of David. But to have his own son and heir join the charade against him is a profound humiliation. The rage is rage only a father can feel for a son, a son who could have received the whole future from the father but would have none of it. This is the rage and the speech of one who has been "rejected" (cf. 15:2, 3, 26). The rejected one can say to his son, "You chose (*bhr*) this son of Jesse" (v. 30). Still Saul will not name the name of David. It is enough that God has chosen this one in rejecting Saul. The rejecting and choosing of God, however, is not as awesome and as shameful as the choosing and rejecting now being done by Saul's own son and heir. A father has a right to expect loyalty from his son, even if he can no longer have it from God. Jonathan, like Yahweh, has rejected Saul and chosen David.

Saul pulls out all the stops of woundedness and indignation. He reminds Jonathan (as Jonathan must have known very well) that Jonathan will not have a kingdom as long as David lives (v. 31). Jonathan does not seem to care. He turns a cold indifference toward the great gift his father has in his possession. Indeed, Jonathan has already sworn allegiance to David's coming greatness at the expense of his father. But if Jonathan does not care about his own future, Saul cares enough for both of them.

Saul gives, yet again, his harsh verdict on David. This "son of Jesse" (*ben yišay*) is in fact a "son of death" (*ben mawet*) (v. 31). (The RSV renders "son of death" as "he shall surely die.") Saul gives David a "new name," which in fact is a death sentence. Jonathan tries to insert reason into Saul's tirade (v. 32). He dares to ask the question of guilt that David posed in verses 1 and 8. Jonathan asks Saul for evidence that David is disloyal to Saul. The anger of Saul, however, is beyond such reason. Saul answers by throwing his spear at his own son (v. 33). Saul has been driven beyond the reason a son may expect from a father. His action against Jonathan is a measure of his crazed hatred, for the whole world is now against him. The scene ends in exhaustion. Jonathan leaves the table and the court (v. 34). He feels nothing for his pitiful father, but everything for David.

The terrible choosing and rejecting of Yahweh has now come very close to home in this beloved, beautiful son. The hurt is closer than the reality of God. It is as real as Saul's own son, who betrayed for the sake of this other loyalty. The narrative has us watch while all the power for life seeps away from Saul and rushes toward David. Jonathan knows it is happening and moves on. Now we can understand in more experiential terms what it means to have the spirit leave and the spirit "rush." The theological terms take on human qualities when linked to the affection and alienation of Jonathan, from whom both Saul and David expect so much. The coming and going of the spirit is not an external supernaturalism. It happens in the daily drama of alienation and affection.

I Samuel 20:35–42

The narrative has passed its moment of tense drama. Jonathan and David know yet again what they had known already: David is in deep danger and Saul is beyond reason. It is high narrative art to interest us so passionately in something we had already known. The drama of the arrows is played out as a resolution of the plan of verses 20–22. Jonathan shoots the arrow and says to his boy (and to David), "Hurry, make haste, do not stay" (v. 38).

The arrow episode is extraneous, because as soon as it is over, Jonathan and David converse face to face (vv. 41–42). The tenseness of the narrative is for a moment resolved, because Saul is not present. The tenseness in the narrative is regularly generated by the presence of Saul. The friends, now both in danger, are relieved to be with each other (v. 41). Jonathan dismisses David with a blessing. The peace announced cannot refer to David's present circumstance, for he is not at peace (v. 42). Rather, the blessing refers to the solidarity and reliability of their friendship and their covenant, which offers a peace the world cannot give or take away (cf. John 14:27). Then Jonathan repeats the benediction of verse 23, but now the stakes of the binding are much higher. It is not only "me and you" but "my descendants and your descendants, for ever" (v. 42). There is something final and awesome about these words. It is as though Jonathan now fully recognizes that the tide has turned. Saul has failed, and his own life as Saul's son is gravely in danger.

David will have his way in the future; Jonathan wants access to that future which only David can give.

In this narrative of chapter 20, Saul's role is marginal. What counts is the relation of David and Jonathan. David is portrayed as a man of "steadfastness" (*hesed*). Jonathan's role is much more tricky. He makes a daring and costly choice. He has chosen David. He violates the command to honor his father, for he does not honor Saul. In retrospect this is an act of stunning loyalty on Jonathan's part. Jonathan is to be David's "follower" and for this he must "hate his own father" (Luke 14:26). From our vantage point, with this literature biased toward David, it is easy to choose David over Saul. Jonathan, however, had to choose much earlier, still in the midst of great ambiguity. The text invites us to reflect on the cost of loyalty and the terrible ambiguities within which loyalty must be practiced.

The story of Jonathan and David should not be used for a general celebration of the virtues of friendship. Rather, it is an expose of the wrenching, risk, pain, hurt, and hope required as God brings God's new reign. The narrative (and Jonathan) is clear on the wave of the future. That wave of the future breaks Saul as a person and as a king. The narrative will not wait for Saul while the new kingdom comes. Jonathan reads aright the laws of fidelity concerning God's future.

I Samuel 21—22

David Flees the Court of Saul

This extended narrative unit contains an initial encounter between David and Ahimelech at the shrine of Nob (21:1–9), which has its resolution in 22:6–23. Inserted between the two parts of that story are three isolated episodes in David’s flight: with Achish (21:10–15), at the cave of Adullam (22:1–2), and in Moab (22:3–5).

I Samuel 21:1—22:5

21:1–9. In his flight from Saul, David comes alone to the shrine of Nob, where he confronts the priest Ahimelech. David insists that he is on an urgent and secret mission for Saul. Ahimelech has no reason to doubt David. Running for his life, David and his entourage (which is not visible in this narrative) are hungry and desperately in need of food. The priest is not resistant to David, but he is careful to make sure there is no ritual violation. The only bread available is holy bread, dedicated sacramental bread on which there are serious ritual restrictions. The bread is “holy,” and those who eat it must not be “profane”: that is, ritually impure. In this case, ritual impurity is defined as having had recent sexual relations (v. 4). The priest contrasts “holy” (*qdš*) and “profane” (*hl*), a characteristic concern of priestly officials (cf. Ezek. 22:26; Hag. 2:11–14). David answers appropriately and adequately. Even if this excursion of David is “profane,” there has been no access to women so that the “vessels” of the men are “holy”: that is, not ritually contaminated.

It may be that David plays loosely with the priestly distinction of clean and unclean, but presumably he does not lie. The most compelling argument David can muster is that David and his men must have bread. The argument works; David gets the bread he needs and wants! (The exposition of this text in Mark 2:25–28 suggests David did violate ritual law to secure the bread. The narrative, however, does not linger over such a fine question of the law.) The narrative is singularly preoccupied with the well-being and

success of David; everything else must yield to this concern. Clearly David has a freedom about ritual matters which Saul did not know (cf. 14:45).

In verse 7 the narrative pauses for what will turn out to be a crucial note. Present, and overhearing the conversation, was an agent of Saul, Doeg the Edomite. Nothing is said about him. He is simply there. As we shall see, Doeg comes to play a crucial, ominous, ignoble role in the narrative.

David needs not only bread but a spear (vv. 8–9). David's lack of a spear is sharply contrasted with Saul, who seems to have a spear at every turn and will not be caught without one (18:11; 20:33). It is odd that David is without a spear. This narrative detail may suggest how quickly he fled or how careless he is. Or perhaps the entire pericope is reported so that David may recover Goliath's spear. The priest at Nob is mightily impressed with how well he himself has kept the sword (v. 9a). He is also greatly pleased that he is the one who can now present it to David. David acknowledges that it is a special sword and he is glad to have it (v. 9b). He takes it and departs. The entire confrontation reflects great haste, urgency, and danger. David may be headed for a throne, but here he is still an empty-handed fugitive.

21:10–15. These verses are an interruption in the main plot of David's struggle with Saul. They bear witness to the various contacts and elements of support David has developed, to which he can appeal in time of distress. Two important points emerge for the developing characterization of David. First, he is no longer an innocent and unknown shepherd boy. He now is well-known, with alliances he can count on, with allegiances he can summon, and with political savvy about his own future. He has important political resources at his disposal. Second, and derivatively, David is no longer a passive recipient of the actions of others, as he has been through chapters 16–19. Now he is assertive and prepared to take necessary and bold initiatives. It is a measure of the skill of the narrator that David's character is traced in this way.

David flees again, as is his wont. His flight seems to have no goal, as long as it is away from Saul. David comes to Achish, a Philistine city-king (v. 10). How strange that Achish recognized him (v. 11). Moreover, Achish does not identify David as the one who killed the Philistine champion, nor as Saul's most dangerous commander (as he will be identified in 29:3–5), but as *king* of the land!

Achish knows more than anyone in Israel yet publicly concedes. (Of course Samuel knows that David will be king, and Jonathan has foreseen it.) One can explain Achish's comment as historical anachronism, but the more likely and powerful explanation is that the narrative builds toward a great crescendo of voices, all asserting, one at a time, what even Saul must finally accept. Achish no doubt knows the Israelite gossip. He knows what the women sing (v. 11*b*; cf. 29:5), and presumably he knows how the comparison enrages Saul. He knows enough to make a proper anticipatory identification of David. The narrative builds a compelling case for the inevitability of David's kingship.

David is frightened that he is recognized by Achish (v. 12). David would be safe with Achish if he were simply another fugitive. But recognized as king, he might be destroyed as a threat or held as a valuable hostage. Endlessly resourceful, David acts to "undo" his royal identity by pretending to be insane; he throws himself on the floor and lets spittle run from his mouth (v. 13). (His conduct reminds us of Saul in 19:24, but David, unlike Saul, always operates with great intentionality.) David's ploy seems to work. Achish will not keep David or welcome him. He does not comment again on David's royal identity. Achish needs no more mad people in his city (v. 15), even if they are royal.

The episode with David and Achish is unconnected to anything before or after. It may be an isolated historical note. If it is intended to serve the main story line, it does so by showing that David is everywhere already recognized as destined for the throne. It also introduces Achish, who will have a more important role in chapters 27–30.

22:1–5. The two pericopes in the next unit (vv. 1–2, 3–5) are of marginal importance in the narrative of David's flight from Saul. The first notes that David is next found in the cave of Adullam (vv. 1–2). What interests us here is the report that David became a powerful magnet, attracting all kinds of marginal people. There came to him all who were in distress, all who were in debt, all who were discontented with their life (v. 2). (This populace is not unlike that said to be attracted to Jesus [Mark 1:32–34]). David became their leader and rallying point. The Saul-David struggle thus may not be merely a dispute between north and south but may also reflect tension between the haves and the have-nots. It is conventional to interpret the Saul-David rivalry as a traditional conflict between northern and southern

groups. No doubt there is an element of truth in that notion (cf. II Sam. 19:41–43). But more recent sociological perspectives require us to pay more attention to socioeconomic factors.

It may be that the Saul-David tension also represents a challenge of economically disadvantaged groups against the more stable landed populace (cf. 22:7; II Sam. 9:9–13). This motif illuminates David's identity as an "eighth son," also a quite marginal person. This social role has caused Mendenhall to characterize David as a "Hebrew," as one who has no social standing or social power (pp. 135–138). In the rise-of-David narrative we are indeed watching while a "last one" becomes a "first one" (cf. 1:6–8).

The notes in verses 3–5 tell us that David had friendly connections with the king of Moab (cf. the genealogy of Ruth 4:18–22). This text suggests that David has family ties with Moab (v. 3), so he may be counting on the network of alliances most easily available to him. Finally, in verse 5, we notice that David receives and follows the counsel of Gad, a prophet who will appear once more in a Davidic context (II Sam. 24:11–19). David's means of support are many and varied. In this brief report, David receives both popular political support and the counsel of God through a prophet with religious authority.

I Samuel 22:6–23

22:6–10. We now resume the main story line we left at 21:9. Saul is taking counsel with his men. Unlike David (21:8), Saul as usual has a spear in his hand (v. 6). Saul's opening speech shows how disquieted and uneasy he is (vv. 7–8). Saul addresses the Benjaminites, his own people who have supported him longest and most faithfully.

Saul comes from the tribe of Benjamin (9:1) and has his modest royal capital at Gibeah. The conventional picture of a united twelve tribes constituting Israel is inappropriate to the period of Saul, though that picture may even then have had ideological force. Saul's region of rule consisted only in the area he could manage and control. The tribe of Benjamin, just to the north of Jerusalem, occupied only a small area, though it could claim to be the tribe most intimately connected to the old traditions of Moses and Joshua. The much larger tribal area of Judah to the south was David's home and natural constituency. The conflict between David and Saul reflected,

among many other things, this old tribal division (cf. II Sam. 20:1; I Kings 12:16). For the Benjaminites to have “defected” to David, as Saul charges, would have been a betrayal of Saul and a tribal betrayal as well.

In verse 7 Saul berates his followers, suggesting that they have fared well, having secured through Saul fields and vineyards. They are prosperous because Saul has been effective. Saul casts himself in the role of a chief who has distributed the land to his loyal followers (Cheney 1982). Perhaps verse 2 stands as a counterpoint to verse 7. In verse 2 it is the marginal and indebted, those without land, who gather around David. Saul’s harsh attack on his followers is in fact a statement of self-defense about his own effectiveness. His self-defense is an appeal for their continued loyalty. He senses the flow of loyalty and sympathy against him and toward David.

Saul’s angry statement in verse 7 is followed by a harsh accusation (v. 8): “All of you have conspired against me.” The term “conspire” (*qšr*) is the same verb we saw in 18:1. There, with reference to Jonathan, the word was ambiguous. Here there is no ambiguity. This is the ranting and raving of a desperate man. He obviously has more support than he is able to believe. Saul’s behavior suggests something like a Captain Queeg scene from *The Caine Mutiny*. Saul’s speech no longer shows any respect, regard, or trust for his best advisers and soldiers. He accuses them of not giving him information, of not reporting on how Jonathan has aided in setting up an ambush. Saul’s charges against his Benjaminite supporters, as far as we know, have no basis in fact. But facts do not matter now to Saul. He is increasingly living in his own world of terrified fantasy.

When Saul finished his tirade, there must have been an embarrassed silence among his followers. No, they did not think they would be better off with David. No, they had not conspired against Saul. No, they had not withheld information. Rather, they had not known. They have no way to answer Saul. As the silence extends, it becomes more difficult to break it. The tension grows thick and unresolved.

Finally there is a voice. It is, however, not a Benjaminite. It is not one of those who were the object of Saul’s assault. It is an outsider, a hired gun, Doeg the Edomite. We have already encountered him in the ominous note of 21:7, when he only observed. His speech here reports his observations. Doeg is an outsider who should have had more sense than to speak first in the midst of a family quarrel. But Doeg has news and he is exceedingly eager. He files his intelligence report. He breaks the silence. He thinks to

advance himself by this ill-advised intervention. Doeg's report (vv. 9–10) is correct in two out of three items it repeats from 21:1–9. Ahimelech did give David provisions (21:6), and he did give him Goliath's sword (vv. 8–9). The third element of Doeg's statement, however, is false. Doeg reports that the priest "asked of the Lord" for David, which is not reported in 21:1–9. The narrative manages to use the verb *š'al* ("inquired") once more. The verb may be only coincidental, or because Doeg is so ingratiating it may be a deliberate reference to Saul, contrasting him to the "son of Jesse."

22:11–19. Doeg's report feeds Saul's own suspicion. Saul summons Ahimelech, the priest of Nob (v. 11), who is properly deferential and no doubt terribly frightened (v. 12). Saul's question of him is in fact an accusation: "Have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse?" (v. 13). Saul's rhetoric here is revealing. First, in characteristic fashion, Saul will not name the name of David. Second, "conspire" (*qšr*) is the word Saul has just used with the Benjaminites. Saul has a fascination with the word, and it is found on his lips frequently. Third, Saul's words reiterate in detail Doeg's report (v. 13). Saul trusts Doeg's report in full, no doubt because its content is what he wants to hear. Saul accuses the priest on all three counts: giving food, giving sword, and inquiring of God.

Ahimelech's self-defense is in fact a defense of David (vv. 14–15). For the priest to establish his own innocence before Saul, he must establish that of David, with whom he dealt. His own innocence depends on that of David. Ahimelech's defense of David is fourfold. David is known to be reliable. He is the king's son-in-law. He holds high military office. He is honored at court. Are these the marks of a conspirator? No! Moreover, Ahimelech has performed priestly functions for David on prior occasions and no questions were raised. Why now? (Ahimelech does not deny that he inquired of Yahweh for David, as Doeg said, though the narrative of 21:1–9, as we have said, does not tell us that he did.) On the basis of all this evidence, the priest declares his own innocence. If David is an enemy of Saul, Ahimelech did not know it and therefore acted in innocence. This is an eloquent defense and a truthful one.

It fails to persuade Saul, however. Indeed, nothing in this context of hysteria could have persuaded Saul, for that would mean Saul was reasonable. Saul is completely and obviously beyond reason. The fate of the priest has been sealed in the instant Doeg mentions his name. Data on

Ahimelech's behalf would change nothing. From Saul's perspective, anyone who deals positively with David is by definition guilty, no matter what they do or why.

Saul's verdict is quick and absolute: death to the entire house of Ahimelech (v. 16). The verdict may be quick, but its enactment is not. Saul orders his guards to act but they refuse (v. 17), because they know this is the decision of a crazy man. They will not act because the verdict is wrong and they perceive Ahimelech's innocence. They will not act because they are reluctant to strike a priest of Yahweh. Saul's situation is impossible and fraught with irony. Now he experiences the resistance of which he had earlier accused his people. Saul is a king who cannot command. Saul's will has become destructive of all those around him, and in the end his actions are also self-destructive. Saul is indeed choosing death.

Saul has to find someone who will act on his orders. He knows where to look and turns to the waiting, excessively eager Doeg. Doeg utters not a word but systematically kills eighty-five priests (v. 18)! The savageness of the act is described in detail: "Both men and women, children and sucklings, oxen, asses, and sheep, he put to the sword" (v. 19). The wholesale destruction here is not unlike a *herem* ("utter destruction"; cf. Deut. 20:13–14, 16). It is ironic and telling that Saul refused to execute such massive destruction against the Amalekites (15:9), but now in his deterioration he will act destructively against his own people. Indeed, Doeg went beyond Saul's explicit command.

The true agent who has killed is not Doeg, however, but Saul. Saul is now berserk, acting not unlike the United States in Vietnam when it destroyed villages to "save" them. Saul's response is once again utterly disproportionate to the affront. In chapter 20 David only absented himself from the table, and Saul went wild. In chapter 21 the priest has given a sword and food; in response Saul conducts a massacre (vv. 18–19).

22:20–23. There is a footnote to this massacre. One of the priests of Nob, Ahimelech's son Abiathar, escaped. He flees to David. David now in retrospect can recall Doeg (v. 22). It is David's own carelessness, so David asserts, that led to the slaughter (v. 22). The picture of David taking responsibility for what happened is in sharp and intentional contrast to the picture of Saul, who is irresponsible in the extreme. David's gesture to Abiathar is a small one; in the end, however, David promises to keep

Abiathar safe. If Saul now seeks Abiathar, it is only to get at David. David will keep Abiathar, even as he keeps his own life. On the rhetoric of “your life” and “my life,” see the comparable language referring to David and Jonathan in 20:17.

The episode of verses 20–23 is of particular critical interest, because it greatly illuminates the history of the priesthood in Israel. The text needs to be read in relation to 2:31–36, which provides a general overview of that history. We have seen in 2:31–36 three elements of the history of the priesthood: (1) The house of Eli will be terminated (v. 31); (2) one man of that priestly house shall be spared, but he shall end in grief (v. 33); and (3) there will be instituted a new faithful priestly house.

Now in 22:20–23 we have a counterpart to the first two elements of chapter 2: (1) The priestly house is destroyed by Saul and (2) one man, Abiathar, is saved by David. The third element, the institution of a new faithful order, refers to David’s authorization of Zadok. In I Kings 2:27, 35, where this sequence is completed, Abiathar is explicitly linked to the house of Eli, and Zadok is now fully established. Thus three kings serve to implement the anticipation of I Samuel 2: Saul eliminates the house of Eli, David rescues Abiathar, and Solomon banishes Abiathar and establishes Zadok.

Such attention to the priestly history, however, leads us away from the narrative intention of the text itself. Notice that in 22:6–23, as was also the case in chapter 20, David is scarcely present. When he is present, he is innocent, compassionate, caring, and ready to acknowledge his responsibility. The main character in this episode is Saul, who harshly accuses (v. 13) and more harshly executes (v. 18). chapter 22 concerns the demise of Saul, who is now deeply alienated from his own people. Saul has nothing left but raw power. He has no religious support, no legitimacy, no charisma. We are watching the performance of power from which the spirit has departed. Such power can only cause death. Eventually, as we shall see, such power can only helplessly die amid the massive death it has authorized. Meanwhile, David waits. And Israel waits with David. Partly there is a waiting for Saul to die. Partly there is waiting for a kingdom still promised but not yet “at hand.”

I Samuel 23—26

Saul Pursues David

I Samuel 23:1–29

It does not surprise us any longer that David must flee for his life. Nor does it surprise us that Saul will desperately pursue David in order to kill him. Saul will pursue David to the edge of his realm, to the end of I Samuel, to the end of his own life. Indeed, Saul now has no other purpose than the elimination of David. It is, however, an unequal contest between the pursuer and the one pursued, more unequal than Saul can know. Unlike Saul, David does not travel alone, in isolation. David travels with adoring friends and loyal henchmen. He travels with religious resources and with divine approval. Indeed, he travels with the resolve of the narrator that the story will not end until David is settled, safe, and in power.

23:1–5. In the midst of his flight, David hears that the Philistines are plundering a Judean village, Keilah (v. 1). While David fears Saul greatly, he interrupts his flight in order to fight the Philistines, who are Israel's perennial threat. Pious man that he is, David will not do battle until he is led and assured by Yahweh (v. 2). He inquires and receives divine sanction. His men are still frightened, however. For their benefit, he inquires a second time (v. 4). David receives two answers from Yahweh. Both answers are positive, but the second is more explicit. First, David is simply given permission and authorization. Second, David is given assurance that he will triumph. David does win a great victory and rescues the city from the Philistines (v. 5). He is as effective against the Philistines as he has been from the beginning, and as Saul was in his best times. Success against the Philistines is surely a measure of divine legitimacy.

23:6–14. The battle with the Philistines must have been a welcome respite for David. Now he must return to the endless, seemingly unresolvable conflict with Saul. David is accompanied by Abiathar, the priest he saved

(22:20–23). In this particular episode, however, neither the function of Abiathar nor the danger of Saul is of primary interest. The narrator stresses the ready access David has to Yahweh. David and Yahweh talk as two good friends, in easy trust (vv. 10–12). What counts is David’s ready reliance on Yahweh, and Yahweh’s attentiveness to David and David’s situation.

In the midst of extreme danger, David is not portrayed as a man of action. Rather, in his extreme danger he prays (v. 10). David understands that his proper posture before Yahweh is one of need and that Yahweh is his source of life and hope. David addresses two questions to Yahweh. First, will Keilah, the city he has just rescued from the Philistines, protect him (v. 11a)? Or will that city be intimidated by Saul and hand him over, even though he intervened for them? Second, is the report true? Will Saul come even here (v. 11b)? David is asking about his own safety. It is as though he asks Yahweh for an intelligence report on the future conduct of the other two parties in this triangle, the city and Saul. Yahweh will answer only the second part of the question. Yes, Saul will come even here (v. 11c). Then David asks the first question again (v. 12a). It is as though Yahweh had not heard, or as if the first question were too awkward. But asking a second time yields an answer: Yes, the city will sell you out (v. 12b). David flees. He has escaped Saul yet again (v. 13).

The narrator tells us the meaning of this cat-and-mouse game. The escape does not mean that David is faster or more clever than Saul. No, the escape is possible because Yahweh has intervened: “God did not give him into the hand of Saul” (v. 14). This is a daring theological interpretation. Many other readings of the matter might have been possible; the narrator, however, wants to score the single, crucial point. David’s future is to be understood theologically. David’s life can be portrayed only with reference to Yahweh. Yahweh has chosen and Yahweh has rejected. The various episodes in the conflict between David and Saul simply play out this overriding reality of Yahweh, which neither Saul nor David can change.

23:15–18. Inserted in the middle of “the great chase” is Jonathan’s final appearance in David’s life. We have already seen that Jonathan is utterly committed to David, loves him, and anxiously hopes to receive *hesed* from David in the future for himself and for his descendants. This brief episode simply makes explicit what has become increasingly clear concerning Jonathan’s deep loyalty. Dramatically, the encounter with Jonathan

functions to add one more voice to the voices giving the future over to David. Jonathan comes to give assurance to David, “to strengthen his hand with God” (v. 16). Jonathan begins with a classic formula of assurance, “Do not fear” (v. 17). The formula is a precise response to the fear expressed in verse 15. The speech of Jonathan is intended to permit David to receive the future from Yahweh that is now securely his.

Jonathan follows the “fear not” oracles with two startling statements. First he says, “You shall be king over Israel” (v. 17). Jonathan has finally made explicit the truth out of which he has been acting toward David. Jonathan, who could have clung to his own right to the throne (cf. 20:31), renounces his claim to power in the face of David. He will fully support David and is ready to be David’s second in command. Jonathan’s powerful voice is a voice out of David’s powerful, irresistible future. Jonathan, as the narrator casts him, intends that the certain future of David should nullify the present reality over which his father, Saul, presides.

The narrator then adds a second poignant line in the mouth of Jonathan. “Saul my father also knows this” (v. 17). Saul also knows, says Jonathan, that the future belongs to David. It is an important narrative moment, but we do not yet have an actual speech of concession from Saul. The narrator nonetheless seems to understand how it is with Saul: He knows, but he cannot yet publicly concede. More than that, Saul knows but he cannot yet admit it to himself. Saul knows, but he must keep his form, or his reputation, even his very identity. Saul knows, but until he finally says it out loud he does not have to own it; he does not have to relinquish his flimsy grasp on power and on the future. Saul knows, but he does not yet know that he knows, and so his son Jonathan knows on his behalf.

What Jonathan knows, Saul will put off for at least a chapter longer, or more if possible. In the meantime the chase must continue. Jonathan has said his piece. He has given his assurance to David and told his awesome truth. Jonathan leaves—for the last time—as soon as the two friends covenant again (v. 18). David and Jonathan already had a covenant (18:3). They had already made a mutual promise of *hesed* (20:8, 14–17). They do it again in this text, however, because such mutual promises cannot be reiterated too often among real allies and trusting friends.

23:19–29. Back at the chase, Saul is not without resources. The Ziphites are prepared to help find David and eliminate him. Verses 19–24 consist of an

offer of support (vv. 19–20) and Saul’s grateful acceptance of help (vv. 21–23). Saul’s answer contains the word *hamal*, “You have had pity on me.” *Hamal* is the word used in 15:3, 9, 15 to describe Saul’s protection of Agag the Amalekite against the ban. The act of pity in I Samuel 15 cost Saul his future and his throne. Now it is as though Saul remembers that costly act, as though he recognizes that his allies at Ziph have committed a similar costly act of rescue on his behalf. It is as though Saul refers to himself as the “spoils” not to be “utterly destroyed.”

In verses 24–29 there is no more speech. Now there is only action and report. The narrative takes us hill by hill, cliff by cliff, crag by crag, rock by rock over the terrain to the awaited moment of resolution. David, the hunted one, is cornered at last. Saul is the hunter and, at least for these moments, he seems to have his way against David. Saul and his men are “closing in,” ready to “capture” (v. 26); all seems lost for David. One has the impression that the chase is very close to David. If the narrative of chase continues one more verse (or one more rock), Saul will have him. Saul will show no compassion (*hamal*). Saul will not spare David.

We wait. The tension, however, is broken. News arrives in the camp of Saul. The messenger speaks the only word that could turn Saul from killing David—Philistines (v. 27)! It is always the Philistines. The messenger is trusted and believed. Saul does not equivocate in his response. Saul knows the Philistines must have his complete and immediate attention (v. 28). Saul turns from David, one of his long-term preoccupations, to the Philistines, his other enduring project. David continues to hide in the rocks. David may be our eventual hero, but for now he is a fugitive from Saul. He is in deep danger and has little maneuverability. It is strange, however, that this dangerous moment is dissolved by the Philistine intervention.

The juxtaposition of Saul, David, and the Philistines is suggestive. In verses 1–5 David willingly turns from Saul to struggle with the Philistines, and he wins in order to rescue Keilah. In verses 24–29 the Philistine threat surfaces again, and this time Saul must reluctantly let David slip through his fingers. David is saved because of the Philistine raid.

Even though Saul and David are in deep dispute, they are agreed about the priority of the Philistine threat. For David and Saul the existence and well-being of Israel take precedence over their internal conflict. Both know that the throne of Israel is not worth having unless Israel survives and

prospers. Thus David's safety because Saul turns to the Philistines is a perfectly credible narrative conclusion.

The narrator is reluctant to suggest that the raid of the Philistines and the consequent rescue of David are in any deliberate way related to each other. The narrator stays very close to the facts of the case and makes no explicit theological construal of those facts. We do note that the narrator observes, "God did not give him into his [Saul's] hand" (v. 14). We are permitted the impression that even the Philistine raid is a device whereby David is protected. It is, however, an impression that is only an undercurrent in the narrative. The descriptive reporting of the chapter and the notation in verse 14 suggest how intertwined in Israel is the intention of God and the conduct of human business. At the end of the narrative David is safe. Exactly why is left open for us by the narrator.

I Samuel 24:1–22

This chapter closely parallels chapter 26. Most likely the two accounts are traditional renderings of the same remembered incident. These two chapters bring to a conclusion the dramatic building of momentum toward the final acceptance of David as king and the final nullification of Saul. David and Saul are portrayed in these narratives as masterful speechmakers. Indeed, for Israel's storytellers the speeches matter most for the development of narrative drama. Israel's narrative imagination is based especially in speeches, as is evident in this chapter. Dramatic action consists in people speaking publicly to each other. chapter 24 consists of a brief narrative account of action (vv. 1–5), followed by two extended, well-crafted speeches of David and Saul (vv. 9–15, 16–21). Even in the preliminary element of verses 1–7, David must speak to "persuade" his men.

24:1–7. The narrative action is brief and is quickly told. In 23:27–28 David has been saved at the last minute by the Philistine intervention, which diverted Saul's attention from him. In verse 1, Saul returns from his Philistine venture. We are told nothing of the conflict with the Philistines that ensued between 23:27–28 and 24:1. Clearly the narrator has no interest just now in the Philistine question. Saul returns to pursue David in the south in the region of En-gedi. The narrator also has no interest in the specifics of

the geography. The encounter between David and Saul could have happened anywhere; it needed only a staging ground, such as a cave, for the stealthy act of David and the two extended speeches.

What does interest the narrator is this dramatic “final” encounter between the two adversaries. The shift from the public question of the Philistines to the concrete meeting with David is abrupt: “Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave” (v. 3). Quickly both lead characters are located: Saul in vulnerability, David in the safety of hiding. When we last considered them together (23:26), Saul was the strong, aggressive one and David was the vulnerable fugitive. Now, within a very brief narrative period, the situation is completely reversed: Saul is vulnerable; David is strong. The narrator does not speculate on the inversion. Such inversions characteristically happen to David’s advantage. The narrator leaves us to be astonished (or amused) that the vulnerable king and the safe pretender turn up fortuitously in the same cave at the same time.

In the brief narrative of verses 1–7, Saul is completely passive. He neither says nor does anything. He is otherwise occupied. The conversation is between David and David’s men. David and his men have found Saul vulnerable in the cave. The men have remembered their own danger at the hand of Saul (23:24–26). They see no reason now not to eliminate their enemy and the enemy of David (v. 4). Moreover, they trust David completely. David is to do what is “good in his eyes.”

David’s response is given in great detail. He seems almost to yield to the invitation of his men. After all, he must respond to their loyal trust of him. He makes a first playful gesture and cuts off the skirt of Saul’s robe (v. 4). He approaches the king and uses his sword very close to the person of the king. We can hardly imagine how this act could have happened in the dark without detection. But it happens.

As Gunn observed (1980, pp. 92–95), this gesture is richly nuanced, capable of several different readings. First, the piece of the robe is evidence that Saul was indeed at the disposal of David, and David refused to dispose of Saul. David has spared the king’s life! Second, the double use of “cut off” (vv. 4–5) suggests an act which would have terminated Saul, Saul’s future, and Saul’s heirs. The same verb “cut off” is used three times by Jonathan in his passionate plea for David’s steadfastness (20:14–16). Third, Gunn suggests that to “cut off the skirt” is a playful euphemism for cutting

off the penis and so rendering Saul helpless, void of manhood, and bereft of a future. David's action, of course, could only symbolize and suggest this drastic outcome, for David does not in fact touch Saul's person.

The incident is reported so that the narrator may be heard at different levels of grimness, benevolence, and humor, all of which serve to enhance David's graciousness and his virility, in contrast to the pitiful Saul, who squats in vulnerability and helplessness. The narrator invites the listener to imagine the scene in all its powerful contrasts. David's men are restrained; Saul is made pitiful; David is triumphant and magnanimous. If the connection to Jonathan's plea in 20:14–17 is valid, then David, in refusing to "cut off" Saul's manhood and future, practices the very *hesed* for which Jonathan petitioned.

The narrator, however, is not finished with David's stealthy action. David had responded to urging of his men in approaching Saul at all. Immediately upon his actions, David is smitten with shame and regret that he had approached the king. David utters a formula of high royal theology, both to criticize his own action just completed and to warn his men against further action (v. 6). Perhaps David's stealthy act in verse 4 was only a ploy to fend off the bloodthirstiness of his men. As the narrative presents it, however, David's loyal heart prevails. David is the one to be after Yahweh's own heart (13:14; cf. 16:7). Now his sensitive, obedient heart is smitten. He regrets his act against Saul and refuses to go further. The juxtaposition of verses 4 and 5 thus turn away the eagerness of David's men and portray David in the best light. David stops what was "right in his own eyes" before he does more than symbolic damage to the "LORD's anointed."

The initial action of David and his remorse in response to his action serve three purposes. The men are "persuaded" by David's reasoning. David is positively pictured. Saul leaves the cave, indicating that he is safe and that the dramatic episode is now ended. We are prepared for the two speeches for which the scene in the cave is preparation.

24:8–15. David speaks first. His is a self-serving speech, intended to show the innocence and graciousness of David. The speech intends to put David in the right and therefore, inevitably, to put Saul in the wrong. David addresses Saul as king (v. 8). He is properly respectful and bows deeply. Casting himself as the still obedient and dutiful servant of the king, David asserts that Yahweh has "given Saul into his hand" (v. 10). This is the

language of “holy war,” used against the Philistines (23:4) and against all those who are enemies of Yahweh and of Yahweh’s people. The language suggests that Saul is an enemy of David and of Yahweh. David and Saul were in the cave by no accident; an act of Yahweh “delivered” Saul to David.

“But I spared you!” (v. 10). I was compassionate (*hws*). The term is not *hamal*, the term used for Agag (cf. 15:9), but the sense is the same. David could have “utterly destroyed” Saul, who is his enemy (and the enemy of Yahweh). But David did not—out of obedience to Saul and out of deference to the throne. Yahweh has delivered you “into my hand,” but “I will not put forth my hand.” David is innocent. He “cut off” the skirt of the robe, but that is all he “cut off.” He did not “cut off” Saul’s genitals. He did not “cut off” Saul, or Saul’s throne, or Saul’s future.

David’s speech is intended to convince Saul of David’s innocence and continued respect. The speech has other listeners as well. Also addressed in the speech is the reader who overhears it. David (and the narrator) wants each successive listener to be sure of David’s innocence; David has not violated the claims of “Yahweh’s anointed.”

The speech also wants to tease the listener. Does David mean all he has said in this compelling statement? Yes, certainly, obviously, unambiguously. But surely David is no longer an innocent little eighth son. David knows about power and public appearance, about propaganda and public opinion. David knows that powerful forces are under way in Israel on his behalf. David need not take an abrupt initiative and need not violently force the issue. David knows about patient, trustful waiting. He senses he need not wait much longer. This desperate man, Saul, will destroy himself. David’s speech is a speech of innocence, but we must not be misled by the innocence with which it is stated.

David uses explicitly juridical language (vv. 12–15). He wants to be vindicated and acquitted in the eyes of Saul—or at least in the eyes of listening Israel—and asks Saul to consider carefully the evidence, the kind of evidence proper to a court of law. Saul has already decided that David is a traitor. But on what grounds (cf. 20:32)? There is no evidence against David that will stand up in court or in public opinion. Perhaps David has played to the crowds at Saul’s expense (18:7, 13–16). Perhaps David has exploited Saul’s daughter (18:20–28). Perhaps David has seduced Saul’s son (18:1–5). David has not, however, taken any active, damaging, or

destructive action against Saul. David insists that he is innocent. In this plea of self-defense, David asks only that Saul be free enough of his passions and rage to consider the evidence and let the justice of Yahweh prevail (v. 12). The proverb of verse 13 suggests that if David were wicked (guilty) there would be evidence of such wickedness. “You will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16; cf. John 10:31–32; 18:23). But Saul in response can cite no evidence. There is no guilty fruit from David’s hand.

David follows the proverb with a wonderful image of self-abasement (v. 14). You, Saul, king of Israel, use so much energy on me. But consider who I really am—a dead dog or, less yet, a flea on a dog (cf. 18:18, 23). I am no real threat. Look at who I really am. David pleads that, because he is not a traitor, Saul’s deadly pursuit of him should stop. The narrative has an eye on the immediate danger to David. The narrator builds David’s speech to a powerful, dramatic appeal. David needs to be rescued, and only the responding speech of Saul can deliver him.

The speech of David, however, is concerned with more than immediate rescue. David (or the narrator) is building a record for the long-term future. In time to come, David will succeed Saul. The narrator knows the outcome of the story and does not doubt, even in this danger, the eventual triumph of David. In time to come, when David is established, something will need to be said about David’s treatment of Saul. Then, according to this carefully crafted speech, there will be vindication in David’s own mouth.

The speech of David is masterfully constructed. David is technically correct in his plea and technically innocent. As each point in his case is taken separately, no piece of evidence can indict him. Taken in large perspective, however, Saul is not wrong in knowing there is a dark conspiracy against him and for David. We have seen that Saul knowingly used the term “conspire” even if he spoke the word half crazed (22:8, 13). The narrator, however, has skillfully and cunningly let us see, as Saul cannot see, that David has not sponsored the conspiracy. The conspiracy is the purpose of Yahweh, of which Saul has no knowledge and to which Saul has no access. The problem for Saul is much deeper than anything credited to David. Saul seems to know, even in his fear of David, that David is not answerable for all that has befallen him. Saul must sort out these matters in his response to David.

24:16–22. Now Saul must answer. At the beginning (v. 8) and end of his speech (v. 14), David has called Saul “king.” In verse 11 he has called Saul “my father,” a word of special regard and devotion. Saul answers in kind, “my son David” (v. 16). Saul’s initial statement is a masterful narrative device. Why does he ask whose voice it is (v. 16)? Is it too dark to see? The language is powerfully reminiscent of Isaac, who was feeble and could not identify his son (Gen. 27:18, 32). Is the question placed in Saul’s mouth intended to recall Isaac? Is Saul, like Isaac, old and feeble? Is Saul afraid of being duped? Is Saul dealing with a David who is as swift and crafty and unprincipled as the stealthy Jacob? Is David, in this forceful encounter, about to seize something from Saul that is not rightly his, as Jacob seized from Isaac and Esau?

Saul’s speech in answer to David will also be cast in juridical language, appropriate to the questions posed by David. At the outset, however, Saul is not yet ready for such hard, precise speech. Initially he recognizes David and acknowledges their peculiar relation. Before he can go beyond this point, he breaks down in vulnerability and pathos: “Saul lifted up his voice and wept” (v. 16). He weeps because he must now face what he has long known. He weeps because he must now confront the truth he has avoided. In the moment of confronting the reality of David, Saul must face the truth of his own life.

No wonder he must cry, for he must acknowledge not only that David will win and that he will lose but that his whole effort to be faithful, effective, and powerful, and even “righteous,” has failed. He has failed because of the “evil spirit” and because of the resolve of God, because of the cunning of David—and because Saul could finally not be who he wanted so deeply to be. There is here both tragedy and failure. Beneath both tragedy and failure there is the inconsolable, inarticulate, unmeasured pathos of a life gone empty. Saul must weep. He must weep before God and before David. When he has wept, then he can speak. It is his honest, unrestrained weeping that permits him to yield to the now irresistible and obvious future, which is David. Out of the weeping, Saul can now take up the juridical language required. The narrator has not hurried Saul. He has given Saul time so that he would be able to speak.

Saul stays with the language in which David has set the conversation. David has asserted he was not wicked (guilty; v. 13). Now Saul concedes, “You are more righteous (innocent) than I; for you have repaid me good,

whereas I have repaid you evil” (v. 17). This is the voice of a beaten man who wants out of the struggle. Saul is an “evil man” (so he says in his own mouth), whereas David is a good man. The confession is filled with pathos. Saul’s verdict about himself gathers together the whole of the Saul-David narrative. How did it happen that David should displace Saul? We might regard Saul as a tragic figure (Gunn 1980; Humphreys).

The narrator, however, insists on a moral ingredient in the turn of affairs. It happened for reasons of “good” and “evil.” How did it turn out that Saul eventuated in evil? Was Saul fated? Was it God’s will that Saul should act so? Was it inevitable in the face of David, who has always gone from strength to strength? Saul’s internal debate on the concreteness of good and evil in this meeting comes finally to the conclusion for which the narrator has so long contended: David is entitled to “good.” Even the mouth of Saul concedes that “good” must come to David (v. 19).

In verse 20 Saul utters the words for which the narrator has been waiting: “I know.” In 23:17 Jonathan had reported to David, “Saul my father also knows this.” But we had only Jonathan’s word for it. Now we have the conclusion in Saul’s own mouth. We have known all along about David’s certain triumph. The narrator and Jonathan have known. The commonly shared knowledge about David’s future means nothing unless Saul knows. Unless Saul knows and acknowledges David’s right to the future, the tension, the conflict, the restlessness in Israel will never stop. If Saul does not acknowledge, the old hopes of failed Israel can fight a destructive rearguard action for a very long time. Even in his failure, Saul has it in his power to prevent the fruition of David’s promised kingdom, to thwart Yahweh’s resolve about Israel’s future. But Saul has honestly wept, and now he need not flinch from the reality of God’s future that will exclude him. Finally in a desperate instant of truth, Saul says, “You shall be king” (v. 20). The clause in Hebrew has an infinitive absolute for emphasis (“being king you shall be king”) and should be rendered, “You shall *indeed* be king.” Saul now is the last one to authorize David. Saul knows nothing can stop the coming rule of David.

Then Saul finally comes to his appeal: “And now” (v. 21). (The words are omitted from the RSV.) Saul comes finally to the small matter that concerns him intensely. Saul has abandoned his claim to the throne. His lean appeal to David is that David will not “cut off” my seed and my name (v. 21). The verb “cut off” continues to operate. Saul echoes the concern

Jonathan had already expressed (20:14–16). Saul is cutting his losses. The verb “cut off” is the one used in verses 4–5 concerning the skirt. Saul pleads: Do not *cut off* my future, the way you have cut off my skirt. Saul has no more illusions about being king.

Nonetheless, Saul still heads a landed family in Benjamin (II Sam. 9:9–10; 16:4; 19:24–30). Saul (with his descendants) is still entitled to a reputable place in the public life of Benjamin. Saul struggles with the question as power is transferred: How can one relinquish power and yet survive in a public way? This is a question in every ruthless society where one must win or disappear. Saul knows he has lost the throne. He does not know if he and his family are also lost to history. Must he disappear from the future life of Israel? Will David be that ruthless? Saul has no recourse but to trust himself and his family to the faithful oath of David. The situation of Saul (and Jonathan’s heirs) is ominous, because new rulers live in dread of old ones defeated.

The narrative of David’s response is brief and understated: “David swore to Saul” (v. 22*a*). The narrator does not elaborate. He does not require David to wax eloquent. David does not respond in kind to the grand, eloquent concession just made by Saul. “God does not write thank-you letters.” Saul has, however, secured the promise he needed, even if it is minimal and understated. Saul has gotten from David all he can expect to receive. Saul leaves and goes to his house, having conceded everything in exchange for a terse promise (v. 22*b*). David and his men stay in the rocks where it is safe, because David is still not established as king (v. 22*c*). In his terse promise to Saul, David has conceded nothing new. He has only reiterated what he had already sworn to Jonathan (20:14–17).

David has won, and he wins a good deal more than he asked for. He asked in his speech to Saul only to have the pursuit ended. He asked to be cleared of Saul’s assumption of treason. He asked to be vindicated, to be found righteous. But he never asked Saul for the crown. He does not ask Saul to abdicate or even to designate him as eventual successor. David will take no active role in securing the crown. He will not grasp, but will have the crown only as a gift (Gunn 1975).

The narrative reports the slow, steady working out of God’s purpose. David need not hurry that process, even as he need not doubt it. Saul cannot thwart the resolve of God. David is a man on the way to power, ordained of God. History is not a series of accidental events. History is the working out

of a promise that “brings down and raises up,” that “makes poor and makes rich,” that “brings low and exalts” (I Sam. 2:6–7). Saul is now being brought low, made poor, brought down. The narrative, however, does not linger over Saul. It has its eye on the one destined to rule. David is a righteous man. David will not fail. David’s graciousness to Saul, both in the episode itself and in the oath for the future, costs David nothing of his sure future. The listeners to the story have a deep conviction that in David’s sure future lies their own sure future as well. As David is on the way to the throne, the listeners will go with him—all the way to the end of the narrative.

I Samuel 25:1–44

In chapter 24 and in its parallel in chapter 26, still to come, David seems at last to have established his legitimacy in the face of Saul. In those chapters, David relies upon the powerful promise of Yahweh, which works its own will toward David’s kingship. The counterpart to such trusting reliance is that David is not tempted to violence against Saul. In chapter 25, however, in the face of a very different problem, David responds very differently. He is not at the outset dealing with Yahweh’s anointed king here, and the narrative does not so unambiguously structure things in David’s favor. The consequence is that David lives much closer to the practice of violence. Indeed, David’s potential violence seems to evoke and require the shrewd intervention of Abigail. The outcome of this narrative is reassuring for David, but the route to that outcome shows his dangerous potential and “near-the-surface” destructiveness. It is Abigail who redeems David from his destructiveness and redeems the narrative from its powerful potential ugliness.

25:1. The death of Samuel is reported as an isolated note (cf. 28:3). Since the initial anointing (16:1–13), Samuel has been absent from the David narrative, except for the odd interaction of 19:18–24. Nevertheless, Samuel has been a powerful presence for David. Samuel’s promissory act of anointing has energized David, nullified Saul, and given the narrative its forward thrust. Such a decisive agent will characteristically shape narrative history far beyond his visible appearance. Samuel continues to loom in the narrative. We may wonder why the death notice occurs at this particular

point. It is as though Samuel has lingered over the narrative, waiting until even Saul has finally acknowledged the turn of destiny. When Saul makes that drastic acknowledgment (24:20), Samuel's work is indeed completed and he may die. He has no more work to do.

The story of Abigail, Nabal, and David is a remarkable tale of a triangle with a merited outcome of death for Nabal and a wondrous outcome of love for Abigail and David. David is shown yet again to be under the power of a promise that causes everything in his life to work for good (cf. Rom. 8:28).

25:2–8. This opening of the narrative skillfully accomplishes two things. First, it characterizes the lead roles played in the drama by Nabal and Abigail. Levenson has observed that Nabal is first encountered in terms of his possession (v. 2). He is very rich. This way of introducing Nabal is precisely on target, because Nabal's possessions precede his own person. His life is determined by his property. Nabal lives to defend his property, and he dies in an orgy, enjoying his property. Only after being told of his riches are we told his name (v. 3a). His personality is characterized as "churlish and ill-behaved" (v. 3b). His name says it all. He is a fool (*nabal*). He is not bad but stupid. He has come to think of himself as an autonomous man, believing that "there is no God" (cf. Ps. 14:1), no neighbor, and no social reality. He would indeed do as he pleases. He neither fears nor respects any other, nor does he care for any other.

The character of Abigail, his wife, is a complete contrast. She is of "good understanding (*śekel*) and beautiful" (v. 3). Her beauty may have attracted David. It is, however, her "good understanding," her shrewd common sense, and her cunning way with words that make a crucial difference in the narrative. The combination of "good understanding and beautiful" makes Abigail an obvious counterpart to David himself. They are two of a kind. The word "beautiful" (*yph*) is used of David (16:12) as of Abigail. But in both cases it is the "heart" (*leb*) and the "understanding" (*śekel*) that matter in the narrative. Nabal and Abigail exemplify respectively what the wisdom tradition means by "foolish" and "wise."

David's initial action begins the story by creating a dangerous crisis with Nabal. The provocation of Nabal seems almost deliberate on David's part. David's initial instruction to his men is an act of masterful intimidation (vv. 5–8). David sends word to Nabal during the festival at the time of sheepshearing. David approaches Nabal when his wealth is especially

available, visible, and hence vulnerable. David's message begins with conventional words of greeting: "Peace ... peace ... peace" (v. 6).

David's message, however, is not of peace. He sends a message of intimidation and confiscation. The repeated words of peace function ironically to inform Nabal that his peace may be in jeopardy. The greeting is in fact a warning. David reminds Nabal that, thus far, David has done no harm to Nabal's flocks (v. 7). The very reminder is an implicit threat that he might do harm now. David wants from Nabal "whatever you have at hand" (v. 8). Since Nabal has much goods "at hand," David implicitly asks for an ample amount. David appears to be making a subtle but unmistakable request for protection money. We have been told in 22:2 that David's company consisted of malcontents. Now it is clear that David and his unsettled, greedy malcontents are in fact a threat to those who benefit from, value, and maintain a settled pastoral economy.

25:9–13. Nabal no doubt thought David's men were troublemakers, and Nabal will not deal with terrorists. David's men sent the message and "they waited" (v. 9). Nabal responds in indignation (vv. 10–11). Indeed, Nabal responds as any propertied person might who resents the loss of property to those who are not entitled to it. Who does David think he is? Nabal's rhetorical question does not mean he does not know who David is. He might or he might not. He surely knows David's kind. In Nabal's eyes, David is a nobody. Nabal is engaged in big business. He does not deal with beggars, marauders, gypsies, or tramps. He refuses to pay protection money, either believing the threat is not real or believing he can handle the threat on his own.

David's response to this rebuff is quick and harsh (v. 13). We learn that David has an enormous band, six hundred men, and he dispatches four hundred against Nabal. Indeed, such a subtle threat as was initially delivered has no credibility unless there is enforcement. David is prepared to act forcibly and, if necessary, violently. If the issue is left between Nabal and David, there will be blood—surely Nabal's. David does not flinch from the prospect of shedding blood. The narrator, however, holds that matter in abeyance.

25:14–22. Happily, the simple game of intimidation between Nabal and David is interrupted by a servant who asks Abigail to intervene. The speech

of the servant is remarkably onesided, asserting that David is good and Nabal is bad. In verse 15 the servant's report reiterates exactly David's points from verse 7: There was "no harm" and "nothing was missed." Indeed, David's men were "very good to us" (v. 15). The narrator has deliberately repeated David's words from the mouth of Nabal's own servant. The speaker who reports to Abigail is one of Nabal's own people, but his comments are sympathetic to David. By this device, the narrator adds intentionally to the impression that David is in the right and that David's perspective is legitimate. The narrator stacks the cards against Nabal in David's favor. The verdict that David is "very good to us" contrasts nicely with the judgment that Nabal is "good for nothing" (v. 17). These are remarkable words for the servant to speak to the wife of Nabal. Presumably the words were not a new insight to her.

Abigail hurries to intervene. The list of her "gifts" to David (protection money) is extensive and extravagant (v. 18). Abigail is a realist and stands on no principle but acts shrewdly to save her husband and her wealth. Abigail hurries to meet David; she pointedly does "not tell her husband Nabal of her meeting with David" (v. 19). David's reaction to her coming in verses 21–22 is curious. He assumes he will receive no positive response. He asserts that he has "guarded" all of Nabal's goods and gets no good in return. In his ingratiating way, David anticipates that Nabal will return "evil for good" (v. 21). The phrase contrasts precisely with Saul's verdict on David in 24:17. The use of both formulas so close together suggests that in both narratives the intent is to suggest that David peculiarly returns good for evil in contrast to those around him, who do not. David is, to be sure, quite selective about when to return good for evil. In this case he is prepared promptly to kill Nabal and all his male servants (v. 22). The term rendered "male" (RSV) in the Hebrew has the crude, explicit reference, "those who piss against the wall." Thus the male members of Nabal's company are categorized by their method of urination. The phrase is regularly used for those who are despised.

25:23–31. David, however, has misjudged Abigail. Abigail engages in a long, winsome speech in which she shows her extraordinary boldness, common sense, and capacity for effective language. Her speech reverses the flow of the narrative. She begins with ostensive obeisance and properly shapes the relation as one between "my lord" and "your handmaid" (v. 24).

The contrast to Nabal's surly talk is unmistakable. Abigail first disposes of Nabal as a factor in the negotiations. He is a fool and is not to be taken seriously. Notice again, in verse 25, it is "my lord" and "your handmaid." McCarter suggests that verse 26, with its words against vengeance, properly belongs at the end of the narrative. However, in terms of their dramatic power, the actions of Abigail have already resolved the question of vengeance. Her presence has already kept David from killing. Her presence has in fact effectively eliminated Nabal. He has ceased to exist as a serious character in the narrative. Again, in verse 27, there is only "my lord" and "your servant."

In verse 28 we arrive at one of the pivotal statements in the entire narrative of David's rise. We have seen how David's coming rule is acknowledged by character after character, until finally in 24:20 even Saul has conceded. Now, in 25:28, even the acknowledgment of Saul is topped by this shrewd and discerning woman, who seems to understand everything. Her acknowledgment of David's future goes beyond that of Saul in using the formula "sure house," which parallels the dynastic formula of II Samuel 7:16. Here the royal formula is almost like an official declaration in the mouth of this wise one. Moreover, either in shrewdness or in theological extravagance, Abigail confirms that David is "fighting the battle of Yahweh" and will do no evil. This remarkable claim seems remote from the actual David of this chapter, who is engaged in racketeering. But Abigail, as the narrator renders her, is playing for high stakes: namely, her own well-being and future. High stakes call for the playing of high cards.

The remainder of Abigail's speech reads almost like a benediction for this future king (vv. 29–31). The life of "my lord" will be preserved in the care of Yahweh, whereas the lives of his enemies will be rejected (v. 29). "My lord" will have no cause for regret, because he has not taken vengeance. David's resolve in verse 22 was to take harsh vengeance on Nabal. Abigail of course knows of David's resolve against Nabal and seeks to overcome that ominous threat. The narrator has Abigail know much more than the specifics of this narrative. She also knows, according to the narrative, that David is destined for the throne in Israel.

Abigail's artful response must deal at the same time with the immediate matter of Nabal and the long-term interest of the throne. Abigail does not want David's immediate temptation to vengeance to intrude on David's legitimacy for the throne. Abigail's promise to David, which dares to echo

the promise of Yahweh, is that the throne will surely come, the divine promise will be kept (vv. 28–30). The future is so certain for David that vengeance on Nabal is rendered both unnecessary and unwise. By indirection, Abigail asserts that a great king like David does not need to bear the mark of this little vengeance.

Abigail concludes, “Remember your handmaid” (v. 31). How remember? Remember me when you come to your throne, when you come to your paradise (cf. Luke 23:42–43). Remember me in gratitude. Remember me as the one who talked sense to you. Remember me as the one who protected your coming regime from the blood of Nabal. Remember me for my own well-being, for unless you remember me, I am left only with this hopeless Nabal.

25:32–35. David’s speech in response is a worthy match for Abigail’s eloquence. It is as though through Abigail’s words of warning David recognizes for the first time how his vengefulness would have put his own future at risk. Notice the parallel situation and the different resolution with Uriah and Bathsheba (II Sam. 11–12). In that later narrative there is no Abigail to intervene. David acts by what is “right in his own eyes” (11:25) and brings an abiding sword into his house (12:10). But not here. Abigail has made the difference.

The startling discovery—indeed, startling self-discovery—causes David to begin his response to Abigail with a threefold formula of blessing:

Blessed be Yahweh ... who sent you,
Blessed be your discretion,
Blessed be you (vv. 32–33).

The blessings begin with Yahweh. Yahweh has dispatched Abigail, who has saved David from the guilt of murder. David expresses what it would have been like without these blessings (v. 34). Had it not been for Abigail, David would have done in both Nabal and himself. David is persuaded by Abigail and accepts her gifts (v. 35; cf. v. 18). David has taken Abigail seriously and accepted her entreaty. David is a free man, free of vengeance—thanks to Abigail. She has saved his life and his future.

25:36–38. Finally the narrator returns to Nabal. His last appearance was his speech of reckless defiance (vv. 10–11). Now he is engaged in a reckless,

self-indulgent feast, “very drunk” (v. 36). Abigail had told him nothing before her meeting with David (v. 19). She still does not tell him in the midst of his party (v. 36). Only when he is sobered does she tell him. When he heard his wife’s words “his heart died”; he became like a stone, and spent ten days dying (v. 37). Was it a stroke that caused him to linger ten days? Did he die because his wife had deceived him? Because David had intimidated him? Because he had lost control of his life? These may be possible explanations, but the narrator is quite explicit about the cause of death. Yahweh smote him (v. 38). What David refrained from doing, Yahweh did. Yahweh took vengeance, as David did not dare to do. Nabal (unwittingly) had affronted the coming king. And he paid. Pitiful Nabal calls to mind the rich man in Luke 12:16–20, who had so much, who self-indulgently celebrated his wealth, and who finally died because he was not “rich toward God” or toward God’s anointed. Abigail was rich toward God and lived. Nabal stands as a powerful warning for all those (including Saul?) who stand in the way of David.

25:39–44. David regards the death of Nabal as vindication for his own faith and his own restraint. It causes him to sound a fourth “blessed” to match the first one in verse 32. Yahweh is blessed because Yahweh has avenged (v. 39). David was not to avenge, and need not, precisely because Yahweh will act on his behalf. David is convinced not only of his own innocence (righteousness) but of Yahweh’s righteousness. In verse 21 Nabal has “returned evil for good.” Now, as a resolution of that perfidy, Yahweh has “returned evil” on Nabal (v. 39). Things are squared away and David is thankful.

The conclusion of the story is almost anticlimactic but not unexpected. David wooed Abigail. And he took her. Samuel had warned that kings would “take” (I Sam. 8:11–20). Later David will more rashly “take” Bathsheba (II Sam. 11:4). Here he takes Abigail, who must be regarded as a willing partner. She is not forcibly seized. Indeed she is, by her speech, an active party in forming the new connection with David. Abigail is the perfect partner for this headstrong man, knowing how to be shrewdly discerning, politically efficient, and theologically astute. As was no doubt necessary in her social world, her great and uncommon strengths were couched in an appropriate deference to the one who will be king (v. 41; cf. vv. 23–24). Levenson and Halpern propose that, with this alliance with

Abigail, David claimed considerable wealth, territory, and influence, which had been Nabal's and which helped form a political and economic base for his Hebron governance.

chapter 25 is an exceedingly subtle and complex narrative with well-articulated characters and artistically rendered speech. The action and speech of the narrative concerns a triangle in which David and Abigail crowd out Nabal. Running through the narrative, however, is another powerful theme: the righteousness of David and the fidelity of Yahweh. The narrator, Yahweh, David, and Abigail (v. 26) are all agreed that Nabal should receive a deadly retaliation for acting against David. The question is how that retaliation will be effected. The story turns on the tension between David's determination for vengeance and Abigail's subtle persuasiveness in preventing David from being his own agent of revenge. David's determination and Abigail's subtle persuasiveness are resolved in the readiness of Yahweh to work the needed vengeance. In the end, Abigail and David both trust and affirm that vengeance belongs to the Lord—and not to us.

David resolves to take vengeance (vv. 21–22); Abigail prevents his action (vv. 23–31); David is grateful that he has been restrained (vv. 32–35). The story is direct, candid, earthy. At the two crucial points, however, concerning Abigail's intervention and Nabal's death, Yahweh is the decisive actor (vv. 32–33, 38–39). David's life follows Yahweh's faithful intention. Abigail serves that intention in everything she says and does. All her actions are informed by her conviction that David will have a "sure house" (v. 28). That house is made more sure by the restraint of David and the decisive work of Yahweh.

I Samuel 26:1–25

Since chapter 16, the narrative has been shaped so that Saul and David are on a collision course. Saul is the entrenched king under threat. David is not a threat to Saul because of his own aggressive initiatives against Saul but because of the inscrutable workings of Yahweh, wrought through the odd turns of the narrative. In hearing this narrative, Israel knows there must be a confrontation between Saul and David. There must be a resolution of the issue of power. Neither the resolution of Saul's throne nor the

celebration of David's promised throne can be narrated without involving the other.

Saul and David, in this dramatic narrative, are locked into an inescapable win-lose situation. The narrator intensifies our eager expectation of that inevitable meeting and then makes us wait for its resolution. We seem to wait an inordinately long time. In its narrative presentation, however, Israel can wait patiently, because Israel has confidence in the outcome—which will surely be Davidic. What interests Israel in the narrative is not simply the outcome but the tortured, artistic way in which the outcome is wrought.

In the end, the confrontation of Saul and David has an odd settlement. For a long stretch of the narrative, Saul is the stalker seeking out David; David is the one stalked, who must always seek escape. Even at the threshold of this climactic episode, Saul and David are in their assigned roles. As this narrative begins, however, their roles are reversed. Abruptly and unexpectedly, Saul is the hunted one and David is the hunter. The reversal of roles is wrought with deftness. David, we know, is sure to succeed; however, we learn that he is unwilling to seize violently his unclaimed, unavoidable success.

In the memory of Israel, the narrative confrontation can have only one outcome: David will win. David must win, both because history is remembered that way and because the narrator has shown us the hidden hovering of Yahweh over the life of David. For the same reasons, Saul must lose, because the memory of Israel knows he was beaten and removed from power and because the narrator offers the irrevocable verdict of Samuel against Saul. The outcome is sure. Its telling, however, is anguished, paced, disciplined, and finally breathtaking in its power.

With its deep joy and pride in David, Israel loved to tell and retell the outcome of David over Saul. That outcome was so sweet for David, so pathos-filled for Saul, that it required the best narrative art Israel could muster. We have already seen this tale told in chapter 24. To record only the tale, chapter 24 is enough. Israel, however, knew this tale was crucial for its future, its faith, and its self-understanding. Israel could not leave the story with such a simple telling. The same narrative is retold in chapter 26.

At a surface reading, the two versions are parallel and in some sense the second is redundant. The story line is the same in the two tellings. David by stealth has sleeping Saul in his power. David can kill Saul but he refuses.

David will not strike the life of “the LORD’s anointed.” In both cases, the narrative ends with an exchange of speeches between the two. Saul is grateful and yields to David. David is noble, reticent, and confident. Both accounts show how the flow of the narrative, and of the historical process, is toward David’s success and Saul’s demise.

A closer reading, however, permits us to observe that the two narratives are not simply parallel. Taking up the same basic story line, chapter 26 retells the story with important points of intensification. The intensification of chapter 26 beyond chapter 24 is enhanced by its location in the larger narrative. This chapter is the last meeting and last exchange between the two heroes who have become deathly rivals. Saul will appear again only in the secret, disastrous meeting of 28:3–25 and in his own death scene (31:1–13). In terms of narrative power and significance, chapter 26 culminates the Saul narrative. This is his last appearance. Saul’s last word is a relinquishment of the future to David. Israel’s storytellers will not quit until they have David fully legitimated, even in the mouth of Saul. The long-awaited outcome is now in hand (and in ear), an outcome sweet for David, poignant and painful for Saul.

26:1–5. As in chapter 24, Saul receives a report of David’s whereabouts and mobilizes his troops to seek David out. In this case, however, the meeting is not accidental. David explicitly seeks Saul out for the confrontation. David is much more aggressive in this telling of the story.

26:6–12. David is accompanied to the camp of Saul by Abishai, the son of Zeruah. The sons of Zeruah are David’s kinsmen and his most loyal and ruthless accomplices. They are fearless, unquestioning in their devotion to David, and ready to kill. This encounter with Saul is made more public than chapter 24 by the presence of Abishai and by the presence of Saul’s companion, that most fearless warrior, Abner (v. 5). Abishai is ready to kill Saul, who is explicitly called David’s enemy (v. 8).

David, however, is either more loyal to Saul than Abishai suspected, more agile, or more farsighted. David’s words in response to Abishai witness to a theological conviction beyond the horizon of this eager soldier (vv. 9–11). David will not lift his hand against Yahweh’s anointed (v. 11). Nor will David permit Abishai to do so (v. 9). It is not that David shrinks from the welcome prospect of Saul’s death. David is able quickly to name

options for Abishai of how Saul might die: by God's hand, by natural crisis, by battle wounds. (See the same sorts of options later offered to David, II Sam. 24:12–13.) There are a variety of acceptable options, and Saul will surely die—but not in any way that implicates David. David has spent the long chapter 25 avoiding bloodguilt against Nabal. How much more will he avoid it with Saul, the anointed!

David finally does what he came to do, an act the bloodthirsty Abishai can hardly appreciate (v. 12). David takes the spear and water jug of Saul. The spear is prominent everywhere in Saul's life, as defense, as safety, as expression of anger, as sign of authority. Now all that is in David's hand. David would rather have Saul's emblem of power than Saul's life. There is no bloodguilt attached to spear-taking.

David's act is one of daring and cunning. It is, however, not mere daring or mere cunning. Saul was asleep and did not notice. His sleep was Yahweh-induced (v. 12). It was a "deep sleep" of the kind Adam knew in the creation of Eve (Gen. 2:21), of the kind Abraham knew in the promise of God (Gen. 15:12). "Deep sleep" is Yahweh's way of making David safe and Saul vulnerable. The motif of "deep sleep" is one important narrative advance of this chapter beyond chapter 24, which contains no such allusion. The introduction of "deep sleep" signals the way in which Yahweh is irresistibly at work for David and consequently aligned against Saul, making Saul helpless and impotent. While chapter 24 leaves open the chance that David may be only "lucky," this chapter makes the hidden decisiveness of Yahweh much more obvious.

Yahweh's strong presence and commitment to David operate everywhere in David's interest. Against the will of Yahweh, Saul has no chance. The story is given a powerful theological turn by crediting the sleep to Yahweh. The narrator wants to suggest that much more is at work than is apparent to any of the characters in the drama.

26:13–16. We have noticed that Abner is with Saul (v. 5). The narrative interlude concerning Abner is another departure of this telling from that of chapter 24. The introduction of Abner into the narrative sharpens the dramatic contrast between David in his innocence and Saul in his diminishing strength. Abner embodies what is best, most noble, most courageous, most impressive about the Saulide movement. Abner is not only the heart of Saul's military power but probably the primary factor in

maintaining public attractiveness and loyalty to Saul. This episode perhaps looks ahead to II Samuel 3, in which Abner is celebrated and killed and then respected and honored by David. In our few verses, David both salutes and ridicules the heart of the Saulide party.

These public dimensions of the David-Abner meeting are focused by the narrative in a direct conversational exchange. Acknowledging that Abner and not Saul is the real power, David calls to Abner (v. 14). Abner's brief answer is defiant, referring to Saul as "the king." Abner and the narrator make clear that Saul is king and David is a challenge to be dismissed. In the narrative, however, Abner's haughty response is only an invitation for David's shrewd and baiting speech (vv. 15–16). In these few lines David manages to honor Saul, to take Abner seriously, and yet to ridicule him. David is not put off by Abner's careful reference to Saul as "the king." Three times David reiterates the phrase "the king," indicating his own acknowledgment of Saul (vv. 15–16). Then David escalates the language to "the LORD's anointed." In the same line honoring Saul, David indicts Abner, who had this important responsibility of guarding the king and who has been negligent.

By such skillful words, David has rhetorically dismissed the entire Saul party. Abner may be loyal and brave, but he slept! He did what a soldier on sentry duty dare never do. He failed. Abner could not know, of course, that his failure was because of "deep sleep" sent by Yahweh. Abner faces "principalities and powers" allied with David. Against them Abner is sure to fail. Abner answers not a word to David. He stands indicted, reduced to silence.

26:17–25. Only now does David's intervention receive an answer from Saul. Saul recognizes David and calls him "my son," a term of intimacy and perhaps legitimacy (v. 17). David responds formally. It is not "my father" (as in 24:11), but only "my lord, O king." David then speaks at length. David first asserts his own innocence and asks for evidence to the contrary. Of course there is no such evidence, for David is scrupulously innocent (v. 18; cf. 19:4–5; 20:1).

David then exhorts Saul to sort out his reasons for the pursuit of David (v. 19). Saul's pursuit may be instigated by Yahweh (which we do not believe, nor does David). Or perhaps Saul has acted on bad advice. Either way, the endless, relentless pursuit of David will cause David to leave

Israel, to leave the land of Yahweh, and to depart the rule of Yahweh. To be driven from the land is to be dispatched where he must serve other gods who rule other lands (cf. Josh. 24:14–15). David will violate the first commandment, and it will be Saul's fault! Finally, David appeals to Saul not to drive him away, to die away from the face of Yahweh (v. 20). This is a desperate, poignant appeal. How odd that while the narrative traces the growing success and legitimacy of David's theological claim, David's actual situation vis-à-vis Saul grows more and more precarious.

The narrative situation of David before Saul and the political situation of the two are in tension. David's position in the battlefield against Saul is exceedingly dangerous; Saul seems to be winning (cf. 27:1). The narrator, however, does not intend simply to present a factual report but is concerned with a very different matter: namely, the destiny of David, Saul, and Israel as they are held in the hand of Yahweh. The rhetoric the narrator places in the mouths of the principals concerns an overarching theological reality that runs beyond the current military situation. While Saul may be momentarily successful against David, the rhetoric on the lips of both bespeaks a very different reality, one David did not devise and Saul cannot resist. The narrative concerns the working out of Yahweh's will, which happens through military and political acts but seems to have its own odd, inexplicable power. We shall not understand the power, intent, or playfulness of the narrative unless we see that it concerns this second, more elemental reality.

When David finishes speaking, Saul responds (v. 21). Saul is remorseful. He confesses his sin against David. Saul does not blame his actions either on Yahweh or on "men" who stirred him up. Saul did it himself and takes responsibility for his actions in a way he has not earlier. Saul is indicted by his own mouth. Now he promises that he wills David no evil. Saul values David. Saul concedes that he has acted foolishly (v. 21; as foolish as the fool [Nabal] in chapter 25). Saul's confession of wrong is here much more explicit and direct than in chapter 24. Saul asks David back to his camp (v. 21a), but David makes no move to return to Saul. Instead, David shows the spear for the first time, reminding Saul how vulnerable and "defrocked" Saul now is.

Primary interest for the advancement of the larger narrative concerns the two speeches in verses 22–25. David's magisterial theological statement (vv. 22–24) does not explicitly respond to Saul's statement of verse 21.

David's answer, however, does take up Saul's confession. Saul has admitted his wrongdoing (v. 21). Now David asserts that wrongdoing, righteousness, and faithfulness do matter. David and Saul live in a world of moral symmetry and may expect to be treated by God according to their conduct. That is the premise agreed upon. Then David draws the conclusion. In contrast to Saul, he, David, is a man who has done righteousness (*ṣedaqah*) and faithfulness (*'emunah*). He has done so by his decision to spare Saul when he could have killed him. Thus David's righteousness is not a general claim but a quite specific one, derived from this narrative event. David states his own innocence and his conviction that therefore God will treasure his life and deliver him. David now seeks nothing from Saul but only from Yahweh. Saul has become irrelevant.

This speech by David is an important advance beyond chapter 24. Since it is David's last word to Saul, his speech is a vindication of himself and an anticipation that he will receive the throne as a just reward, as a response of Yahweh to David's faithfulness and innocence.

The concluding speech of David is matched and answered by Saul's final statement (v. 25). Saul asserts a sweeping blessing upon David; again, a rhetorical, theological escalation beyond chapter 24. In the mouth of Saul is the insistence of the narrator that David is indeed the bearer of God's blessing. David warrants what Yahweh will give him. Saul's statement contains two absolute infinitives, thus making Saul's verdict on David exceedingly strong and intense. The claim of David (vv. 22–24) and the relinquishing acknowledgment of Saul (v. 25) are as far as the narrator could imaginably go in this final conversation.

In these verses we have had the way prepared for the demise of Saul and David's ready, quick assumption of power. While the brute facts of power will be worked out, the narrator has attended to the matter of theological legitimacy (both David's innocence and Saul's acknowledgment) and to the delicate narrative path by which power is transmitted and transformed in Israel. The narrator is not indifferent to historical realities. He has, however, attended primarily to larger theological issues and to the more delicate literary, rhetorical matters that surround historical realities and give them significance, legitimacy, and persuasiveness. Saul has spoken a powerful benediction over David. He had no choice. Yahweh gave him no choice. Saul's word, perhaps spoken grudgingly, is Yahweh's word concerning David.

I Samuel 27—30

David's Philistine Venture

These chapters narrate a special episode in David's life as a free-lance warrior pursuing his own ends in the south. The main story line in these chapters is removed from the struggle with Saul. The absence of Saul is evidence that the narrator is focused primarily on the rise of David, and only derivatively on the fate of Saul. Saul receives his importance, for the narrator, only in relation to David. The extended narrative of David's "Philistine venture" is interrupted in chapter 28 to provide one more glimpse into the pitiful, hopeless, hapless condition of Saul.

I Samuel 27:1—28:2

This narrative shifts the scene abruptly. David is operating out of Philistine territory. David gambles for high stakes in his Philistine venture. He risks his political future in Israel by standing in solidarity with the feared and hated Philistines. David must be an endlessly inventive man to make such a gamble work. The narrative indicates that David is not only inventive but blessed with remarkable good fortune.

27:1–4. We are told it was in order to escape Saul that David moved his entire company into Philistine territory. David, like Saul, has made a career of fighting Philistines. The Philistines are the litmus test for any would-be Israelite leader. For this narrator, however, David transcends every such conventional criterion. Only David would dare an alliance with Israel's perennial enemy. David is not afraid to risk what is radical and unconventional as a way into his future, because he knows Yahweh stands with him and because he is the man for such a risk. David's gamble pays off because Saul abandons his chase (v. 4). In this high-risk environment, David has a moment free from threat.

27:5–7. Immediately David begins to bargain and look after his own interests. David requires a separate, autonomous field of operations and is given such a base in the city of Ziklag. The historical observation of verse 6 suggests that David's possession of the Philistine city was a permanent royal grant and that Ziklag remained a private royal property long after the Philistines had ceased to be a political factor.

27:8–12. The narrative reports the success of David and the careful subterfuge he operated. He is portrayed as a con man of the first order. With his band of dissidents, David is a raider who works among and exploits the people of the south (cf. 22:2). It is not impossible that his approach to Nabal in chapter 25 was part of this enterprise. David took no prisoners. He might keep sheep, oxen, asses, camels, and garments, but no human prisoners (v. 9). This is especially interesting with reference to the Amalekites (v. 8). It is vividly in the mind of Israel (and the narrator) that Saul's fateful mistake was with reference to those same Amalekites (15:9, 15). Saul's mistake was that he let King Agag live and also that he took cattle as spoil. For this he lost his royal future. Yet against the same Amalekites, David does take spoil.

Perhaps the narrative does not offer an explanation for this contrast to Saul because no explanation is required. We are only required to be amazed and to notice again that David's life does not seem to be subject to the normal restraints that proved so costly to Saul.

This chapter and its continuation in 28:1–2 and 29:1–11 are completely devoid of theological reference. There is no intervention of God or God's agent (as Samuel), no reference to religious obligation. Perhaps David is permitted to do what Saul could not do because the action takes place in Philistine territory, and by no stretch of the imagination can David's forays be construed as "wars of Yahweh" (although Abigail shrewdly refers to these raids as "battles of Yahweh"; 25:28).

When Achish questions David about his raids (vv. 10–12), we learn why David takes no prisoners. It is not because he is bloodthirsty and wants to kill. Nor is it because he is pious and practices "holy war." It is because David is playing a double game. The text reports that David conducted raids against the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites (v. 8). When asked about these raids, however, David provides a misleading and therefore reassuring answer to Achish; he says they were "against the Negeb of

Judah,” or “against the Negeb of the Jerahmeelites,” or “against the Negeb of the Kenites” (v. 10). The list given in verse 10 not only varies in some particulars from the list in verse 8; it is a completely different list, a deliberate misrepresentation of his activities. David in fact raids the old enemies of Judah (v. 10), but he reports to Achish that he is raiding Judah and its allies (v. 8). David leaves neither man nor woman alive because he wants no tattletales left to report that the list of verse 10 contradicts the actual list of verse 8 (v. 11).

One must pause to marvel at this scene in David’s career. David is no political innocent; he is ruthless and calculating, confident enough to manipulate Philistine cover for Judahite advantage. One must also marvel at the grip David had on his entourage. Whether the source of that grip was charm or intimidation, his men’s love for him or their fear of him, none of the six hundred leak information about his misrepresented raid.

Achish trusts David (v. 12)! This does not surprise us, because everyone trusts David. People are readily taken in by him and unwittingly support his dishonest but effective strategy. Achish imagines David has burned his bridges to Israel, has made himself an enemy of his people Israel, and thus has no alternative but to remain in Achish’s service (v. 12). This conclusion follows from data Achish has received. The data, however, are false, carefully selected for him by David. David’s careful, dangerous game is working.

28:1–2. Higher stakes are introduced in these verses, and higher risks for David. The Philistines are to fight the Israelites. This is the one conflict David cannot afford to have happen just now, the one eventuality for which his calculated strategy provides no cover. David cannot afford to fight against Israel, for that would vindicate Saul and leave David utterly discredited at home. But David also cannot side with Israel, for that would place in jeopardy David’s relationship with Achish and the power base that relationship makes possible. Achish, of course, knows nothing of the precariousness of David’s situation. He only knows what David has wanted him to know, that David is loyal to Achish, so Achish commands David’s participation with him in the fight against Israel (v. 1).

David does not flinch at this command. David is the perfect actor. He is ready, full of eagerness (v. 2). Achish, innocent and uninformed, makes David and his men his own bodyguards, an assignment of honor under

intense expectation and surveillance. David and his men will have no maneuverability as bodyguards.

The narrative of David and Achish breaks off at this point. Instead of playing out this high-stakes confrontation between Israel and the Philistines, the narrator turns the story back to Saul. The reader is forced to wait to see how the tension is resolved. The pause at this particular point in the story in order to get a glimpse of desperate Saul should not be read as a clumsy intrusion, however, but as a deliberate move by the narrator to hold us in suspense. Moreover, the characterization of Saul in his final defeat at the hands of Samuel and of Yahweh serves as a dramatic contrast to the character of David, for whom all things work for good.

I Samuel 28:3–25

In the midst of David's dangerous game comes this report of Saul's final isolation and deterioration. Ostensibly Saul is still strong, for David has fled from before him and out of the realm. There is, however, an undercurrent in the narrative that belies Saul's appearance of strength. The narrator already knows about the defeat and destruction of Saul, even though David in chapters 24 and 26 seems only to anticipate the reception of power. Saul seems to know as well that the inversion of power is already foreordained. This is the story of a man who is dying from the inside out, with the outside still giving to the world an impression of vitality.

28:3–5. Saul belongs to the old order. He has no future, only a past. In that past (which has already destroyed him), Samuel had been decisive (13:14; 15:28). Now Samuel is dead (v. 3; cf. 25:1), but his power lingers demonically over Saul. Samuel had required that Saul be a pure Yahwist, that he rely on the lean gifts of Yahwism, and that he reject the seemingly more compelling religious and political alternatives to rigorous Yahwism. In obedience to Samuel's stringent faith and narrow political vision (cf. Deut. 18:9–22), Saul had eliminated from his realm all common practices of religious manipulation, such as mediums and wizards (v. 3). Saul's orthodoxy, however, does not help him much in the face of the dread Philistines. He is frightened, and with good reason (vv. 4–5).

28:6–7. Saul tries to act like the convinced Yahwist that he is. He turns to Yahweh for guidance and assurance (v. 6). Yahweh’s heaven is, however, closed to him. Samuel had rejected Saul and “did not see Saul again” (15:34). Now Yahweh, as well as Samuel, will not deal with him. The God whom Saul has sought to serve and trust is not available to him, not by any conventional means of dreams, lots (Urim), or prophets. Saul is abandoned.

Saul becomes more desperate. He acts finally like a person with a diagnosed terminal illness. First that person may try all the clinics and experts; when nothing avails, the fearful one may turn to any possible treatment, any available quack. When approved medicine will not heal, try any faint hope. So Saul, when approved religion will not reassure, goes elsewhere (v. 7): against the religion of Samuel, against the prohibition of Deuteronomy, against his own royal edict. His decision to seek help from a medium is a measure of his moral exhaustion, his despairing faith, his failed life.

28:8–14. The scene with the medium occurs at night. It conjures for us a seedy situation, a situation terribly inappropriate for the king. This is precisely the point, of course, because the narrator wants us to see that Saul is in fact no king. He is simply a frantic man with no resources. Saul goes disguised, not wanting to appear as his true royal self (v. 8). Saul orders a “spirit” from the woman, the very kind he had prohibited. The woman protests the illegality with deliberate reference to Saul himself (v. 9). Saul reassures her. He gives an assurance against his own royal decree. He has prohibited, and now he authorizes. He is a divided self, a man marked with shamed incongruity.

With these preliminaries out of the way, the conversation moves to specifics. Saul gives his order. He utters the dread name—the champion of orthodoxy, the breaker of kings, the one who has defeated Saul with his fearful rejection—“Bring up Samuel!” (v. 11). Saul has spoken the name. Now, all of a sudden, the frightened woman recognizes and understands. She is terrified, not because she has summoned Samuel but because she is in the dangerous presence of Saul, whom she had not recognized. We must not permit the fear of the woman to lead us away from the substance of what she has wrought. Samuel is now present! Even in death, Samuel dominates the narrative. Samuel is and continues to be the most awesome force and figure in Israel since Moses. Saul summons the old covenantal

tradition, the tradition that had authorized him, had opposed him, and had finally destroyed him.

Why does Saul request Samuel? Perhaps because Saul has such terrible unfinished business with Samuel, or with the reality Samuel embodies. Or perhaps Samuel is as close to an ally as Saul can imagine in his moment of desperation. Saul has nowhere else to turn. David has seized the future, and Saul thus knows he has no membership in that future. He can therefore only look back, back in anger, in fear, in resentment, in failure, in yearning. When the awaited Samuel finally appears, Saul looks back in obedience. He gives a long, deep bow (v. 14; cf. 13:10). It may be a bow of remorse and regret, but it also is a bow that dares to contain a small measure of hope. Samuel surely is Saul's last, desperate hope, for Saul is without hope in the present reality, caught as he is between David and the Philistines.

28:15–19. Samuel appears in all his unmistakable cantankerousness. Death has not mellowed Samuel. He is in death exactly as Saul knew him in life: unaccommodating, unhelpful, incapable of understanding. Samuel's blissful sleep is disturbed, and he does not like it (v. 15). The initial word from Samuel does not bode well. Saul justifies his action by saying he is needful and has no alternatives. Saul lays the fullness of his abandonment and despair before Samuel.

Samuel's answer is an imperious, majestic statement (vv. 16–19). Why do you ask me? (v. 16; notice that the verb *sha'al*, "ask," is Saul's name). Saul is identified in the narrative as the needful "asker." Samuel, in an impatient, didactic tone, explains that he and Yahweh are closely allied; if Yahweh has "turned away," Saul may be sure Samuel has also turned away. If Yahweh will not answer, there is no reason to imagine Samuel will answer. No wedge can be driven between the will of Yahweh and the enduring power of Samuel. Then Samuel painstakingly reviews the record. The record has not changed, and the verdict is not softened. The verdict of long ago is still valid and is not under review. Yahweh has torn the kingdom away and given it to your neighbor. The harsh words of Samuel are a repeat of 15:18, with one crucial modification. Now the "neighbor" is identified. It is David!

The speaking of the name of David is, for the narrator, a moment of revelation. This name comes as no surprise to us, however, and surely as no

surprise to Saul. The entire narrative has been building the case for the utterance of this name that now overrides and preempts every other claim.

Verses 18–19 are structured like a lawsuit that asserts the verdict and sentence against Saul. The verdict is guilt: You did not listen (cf. 15:19). Saul did not listen to the demand to “utterly destroy” the Amalekites. Such an old charge, but still with power to destroy! The one who did not utterly destroy is in this moment utterly destroyed by the voice of the old command. The narrator does not observe that precious David also does not utterly destroy (27:9). Only the old, enduring failure of Saul matters. Unlike David, Saul is not exempted from old requirements.

The sentence against Saul is pronounced (v. 19). Everything will be given into the hand of the Philistines: Israel, you, the armies of Israel. We have been led to anticipate a final showdown between David and Saul; now we know that the Philistines will strike the final blow. We turn back quickly to glance at chapter 27 and wonder if David will be allied with the hated Philistines when this battle with Saul begins. The narrator does not allow us time to explore such thoughts, however, because Samuel’s words have such a powerful immediacy. What matters is “tomorrow” (v. 19); “tomorrow you and your sons” will join the dead.

Samuel’s speech is an awesome performance. It is final and absolute. It allows no appeal, no protest, no argument, no alternative. The narrator does not tell of Samuel’s departure. The circumstance of the meeting has no interest for the story. It is the voice that counts. That voice speaks only of death, destruction, nullification. Saul’s prospects at the hand of Samuel (and of Yahweh) have not changed as much as a syllable since chapter 15. Everything in Saul’s career has been enacted under the aegis of this irrevocable decision.

Samuel’s decree to Saul (vv. 16–19) thus contains nothing new. What it contains is the powerful name of Yahweh spoken seven times in the speech, sounded at every turn in the argument. It is the sovereignty of Yahweh, not the peevishness of Samuel, which finally shapes Saul’s quick move to death. Saul is made aware that he lives under the rule of this unaccommodating God. It is a very different face of God from the one that shines on David.

28:20–25. Saul’s response is one of piteous dread. What had been decreed theologically, and long anticipated in the narrative, Saul now experiences in

his own body. Samuel's verdict had nullified Saul's royal power. That decree is now matched by Saul's own sense of his failed, emptied self. Saul falls to the ground prostrate, powerless, as good as dead. He has no strength. He is finished in Israel. The power of his kingship has vanished. He is a failed, pitiful figure. The long threat of the narrative finally ends for this beaten man in this pathos-filled scene. All of Saul's nobility is gone, robbed by forces beyond him. He is left with only the modest comfort of the woman, who cares for Saul, but she cannot combat the massive destruction now to occur.

The woman has been marginal during the main meeting with Samuel, but she is there now to give closure to a failed meeting. She sees that Saul is dysfunctional. The narrator indicates that Saul has eaten nothing all day and night, but the narrator cannot simply proceed with the offer of food. The woman's offer of food becomes an occasion for a conversation around the word "hear" (*šema'*). The woman twice reminds Saul that she has listened to him at great risk (v. 21). Now it is Saul's turn to listen to her (v. 22): that is, to accept food. Saul will not eat (listen), however (v. 23a). He gives no reason. Perhaps his despair precludes such an invitation. Perhaps he sees that eating her food ensnares him even more with this non-Yahwistic agent. Finally he "listens" and he eats (v. 23b). Saul has had such a problematic time knowing to whom to listen. His great error at the outset was to listen to the people and not to Samuel; that is, not to Yahweh.

Read at its worst this pitiful scene reports collusion with a nonbeliever, the woman with prohibited religious practice. Read at its best, this meal is a kind of last supper, one final meal fit for a king (cf. 25:36) who will not be a king much longer. It is as though the woman wants one last regal gesture for Saul when no one else will give it (cf. Mark 14:3–9). Saul receives enough energy from that meal to rise and go (v. 25). He is headed for the Philistines, for his final humiliation, and for his death.

This scene is filled with pathos and anguish. Its vibrant narrative details have the potential of seducing us in our interpretation. The matter of summoning ghosts is an act sure to fascinate the religiously curious. A theological interpretation, however, must hold to a steady discipline against such fascination. The narrative has no real interest in the summoning of spirits or in the role or capacity of the woman. It is Samuel, the voice of the old tradition, that dominates the narrative. The speech of Samuel keeps the narrative thoroughly and insistently Yahwistic. It is Yahweh and Samuel

with whom Saul must come to terms. The narrative invites reflection on the vocation of royal power in a context where God's singular power will not be mocked. To diffuse the narrative into a pluralism in which other powers have force or significance is to misread the story and diminish its voice for our own demanding religious situation. The narrative is a reflection on how hard and dangerous is the single voice to which Saul failed to give heed.

I Samuel 29:1–11

The narrative continues the account of David's precarious sojourn with the Philistines (cf. 27:1—28:2). The Saul-Samuel encounter (28:3–25) has provided a decisive resolution to the Saul story line. David's story, however, is still in need of resolution.

29:1–5. It is critical for the narrator's telling of the David story that David be extricated from the upcoming battle of the Philistines with the Israelites, for the future king cannot fight against his own people. The narrator needs to resolve the situation for David; David must be allowed to retain his presumed loyalty to Achish, his Philistine patron, who has trusted him and who fully believes in him. The narrative strategy for David's extrication from the dilemma is provided by the other "lords of the Philistines" (v. 2). As the Philistine troops are being mustered, the lords notice David and his company and object to their presence among the troops. How ludicrous! The Philistines are to do battle with the Israelites and they have an Israelite here, "the servant of Saul" (cf. v. 3), marching in their own ranks!

The word "Hebrews" in verse 3 deserves special mention. In addition to highlighting the contrast of Philistine versus Israelite, "Hebrews" may also contain a derogatory reference to the scavengers who disrupt Philistine order and who threaten Philistine well-being and prosperity. The term most likely refers to those who are socially marginal and economically disadvantaged, who pose a constant threat to society. In all probability David had developed a reputation as a scavenger (cf. 22:2; 25: 10), so that the Philistine characterization of David refers to his Israelite connection and to his social marginality.

David receives a clean bill of health from his patron. Achish risks his own reputation by giving security clearance to David: "I find no fault in him" (v. 3). These words are a classic example of irony; the reader is to

understand more than the characters in the narrative are able to discern. Achish speaks what he thinks is the truth in order to exonerate David. His words, however, only draw the attention of the reader even more intensely to David's ruse and Achish's naïveté. The reality of the situation is in tension with the reality assumed in the plea of Achish.

The drama of the narrative is intensified by the fact that Achish's word will not prevail against the insistent Philistine establishment. Against the naïveté of Achish, the lords are aware of David's continuing loyalty to "his lord," who is Saul (v. 4). The narrative has the Philistine lords disregard the Saul—David tension in order to focus on David's enduring Israelite loyalty. It is ironic that only Achish, most loyal to David, is the one deceived. Neither the Philistine lords nor we are taken in by David's ruse. The Philistine lords articulate that David is indeed a faithful Israelite.

The Philistine leaders are aware (as was Achish in 21:11) that David is closely linked to Saul in Israel's popular lore. Whereas Saul might have taken this little doublet of a song as a threat and a notice of competition with David, the Philistines (who know nothing of such tensions) take the song as a celebration of solidarity between David and Saul. Saul and David are linked in the Philistine perception in common military exploits. Obviously such a man cannot fight with the Philistines against Saul.

29:6–11. After such a rejection, there must still be a private settlement between Achish and David. Achish again asserts the innocence of David and David's lack of treachery: "I have found nothing wrong in you" (v. 6). As he had previously done with Saul (26:18), David presses the point and wants to know why he is dismissed. Yet a third time Achish must clear David, this time with extravagantly intensified language: "You are as blameless in my sight as an angel of God" (v. 9). That verdict does not suffice against the corporate judgment of the junta, however. Achish either cannot prevail against the other commanders or he will not risk it. Either way, David is vindicated but nonetheless removed from the military action to come.

This narrative is straightforward presentation without any explicit theological overtone. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that it is a carefully crafted presentation with a cunning playfulness. To miss this crafted quality is to miss the point of the narrative. Three points are worth noting. First, David is three times explicitly vindicated by Achish (vv. 3, 6,

9). Partly the threefold assertion is a stylized narrative repetition. It may also be that the narrator has a substantive concern to voice David's innocence against a charge of collusion with the Philistines. If that is the case, however, the vindication is ironic, because it is in the mouth of the very Philistine who understands least about David's actual position vis-à-vis the Philistines and the Israelites.

Second, the David who is in a profound dilemma at the outset of the chapter is, by the end of the chapter, extricated, unscathed, and well thought of by all parties. David, so the narrator knows, is enormously and unfailingly lucky; or is this, we are left to ask, more than luck? There is no mention of God here, but we are dealing with a highly self-conscious theological literature that observes the undercurrent of divine governance without being explicit. Yahweh is with David everywhere (18: 12, 28), surely with him among the Philistines as elsewhere, surely in chapter 29 as in those places where it is explicitly stated. The narrator is not so disbelieving as to perceive the outcome of the narrative as luck. It would be more appropriate to assert that all things work together for good with those who love God (Rom. 8:28). The very same Philistines who will finally dispose of Saul (ch. 31) are the ones who unwittingly rescue David!

Third, and most important, David's extrication from his dilemma leaves us astonished. The outcome of the narrative, however, is not as powerful as is the ironic way of the narrative itself. In the deception by David, the misinformed innocence of Achish, and the prudence of the lords, we are led through a subtle presentation of David's actual guilt, David's claimed innocence, and David's larger innocence for Israelite hearers. The narrator has indeed done justice to David. Narrative subtlety matches David's outrageous cunning.

Achish is adamant and convinced in his threefold statement of innocence. David is utterly innocent: "I find no fault in him (v. 3); "I have found nothing wrong in you" (v. 6); "You are as blameless in my sight as an angel of God" (v. 9). We and all the Israelites know better, however. It is important for David to be innocent, but he does not need to be innocent vis-à-vis the Philistines. The Israelites know that David's enterprise in Ziklag was in his self-interest (to escape Saul). David, however, never allowed his self-interest to work against the interest of Israel-Judah. David enjoys a larger innocence in the eyes of Israel against which the Philistine verdict is irrelevant. David's capacity for deception makes him a hero, for in his

dangerous toying with the Philistines he played and won! The outcome is cause for celebration and not embarrassment or apology.

The story of David is not a “moral” story. Even at its inception, when Samuel first went to Bethlehem to anoint this eighth son, Samuel lied on the way there to keep himself safe (16:1–13). Samuel was on a mission of kingmaking, a treasonable act, but he passed it off as a journey for a sacrifice. Now, for much bigger stakes, the narrator surprises us by his inventiveness. The largeness of the Davidic enterprise and its daring sweep cannot be contained by moral categories. The public importance of David’s future overrides such moral concerns. A better established, more bourgeois people might have chafed at this dark reality. The marginal ones, however, loved David’s daring and found power for themselves in his daring. They discerned in David a strange, irresistible buoyancy deterred neither by the madness of Saul nor by the power of the Philistines. They sensed that the future of David could not be stopped. They went with that future, believed it, and celebrated it. They had no doubt David’s future was wrought by the God of Israel, who need not be mentioned in every narrative in order to be decisively present.

As an addendum we may note that the threefold formula of Pilate’s acquittal of Jesus (Luke 23:4, 14–15, 22; John 18:38; 19:4, 6) sounds like a strange echo of the words of Achish. We may wonder if Pilate, like Achish, worked from misleading data about Jesus. It is possible that the subtle narrative of David’s “trial” before the Philistines is echoed in the Gospel account of Jesus’ trial. In Jesus’ trial, as in that of David, there is a strange rendering of Jesus’ innocence and guilt. Jesus also is innocent, but, read another way, he is indeed guilty of the charges brought against him that he subverts the establishment. As with David, however, the people around Jesus did not regard such subversiveness as a fault but as a cause for celebration and loyalty. The people were as celebrative of Jesus as they were earlier of David. Both Jesus and David provided a daring alternative to an oppressive, unresponsive social arrangement.

I Samuel 30:1–31

The conclusion of the story of David’s sojourn in Ziklag takes a curious turn. David stays there while the Philistines fight Saul. When David comes

back to Ziklag he has to cope neither with Saul nor with the Philistines, who are off fighting each other. Instead, David must deal yet again with the Amalekites. The Amalekites play a recurring role in the entire story of the monarchy. Most recently, they have been subject to David's raids (27:8).

30:1–6. Upon return to Ziklag, David finds a burned city. The Amalekites have taken the women and children and burned everything else. Oddly, and fortunately, they have killed no one, but they have worked great destruction. David joins the enormous weeping at the loss, because his two wives have also been taken captive (vv. 4–5).

But David has even greater cause for alarm. In addition to his personal loss, his public role as leader is in jeopardy (v. 6). He is held accountable by his men for this loss, presumably because he left the city vulnerable by not taking precautions to secure it in his absence. The people murmur against David as they did against Moses. Indeed, they propose to kill David (v. 6).

Verse 6 provides a marvelous juxtaposition. It is said that David was "greatly distressed." Literally, he was "in a very tight place" (*ṣar*). What is noteworthy is that the same language is used in 28:15 for Saul, who announces to Samuel that he is "greatly distressed" (*ṣar*). Both David and Saul are portrayed as persons in deep crises of leadership, and both are deeply at risk. What interests us is the difference of response. As we have seen, Saul seeks refuge in a medium, to have access to the dead and to the past, because he has no other resource. Saul's is a response of desperation, tinged with pathology. David's response is the complete opposite: "David strengthened himself in Yahweh his God" (v. 6). David is portrayed as a powerful mix of health and faith. He is unambiguous about the source of his strength and need take recourse in no secondary religious pursuit. David is indeed Yahweh's man!

30:7–10. These verses narrate the precise way in which David strengthened himself in Yahweh. David inquires of the Lord by means of Abiathar and the ephod. Unlike Saul, David does indeed have access to the required religious technology (cf. 28:15), but the presence of priest and ephod is not central to this narrative. What is central is David's open and trusting communication with Yahweh. David knows to inquire and is ready to listen and obey. Yahweh is attentive and available to answer. The contrast with Saul is absolute. Saul is cut off and hopeless. Saul's distress is acute and

unrelieved, because he is no longer Yahweh's man. David, by contrast, has access to Yahweh. The narrative of chapter 30 makes clear that David counts on and benefits from the patronage of Yahweh.

The answer from Yahweh consists in two infinitive absolutes: "You shall surely overtake them. You shall surely save" (v. 8). David will recover the lost people, including his own wives. David's leadership is secure and will prosper. David is a man who lives by the infinitive absolutes of God's speech. What a difference between those powerful verbs and Yahweh's muteness with Saul. To Saul, Yahweh speaks no reassuring verbs, either finite or infinitive.

On the basis of the oracle, David plans his strategy and acts (vv. 9–10). David does not usurp the initiative from Yahweh, but neither does he abdicate. David inquires in dutiful obedience (v. 8). Then he acts according to a careful military plan. The combination of obedience and initiative is David's way of strengthening himself. The phrase "strengthening himself in Yahweh" anticipates Paul's wondrous two-sided statement of Philippians 2:12–13: "Work out your own salvation ... for God is at work." David counts heavily on God's being at work. At the same moment David is boldly at work on the rescue mission. No wonder we hear no more of the people wanting to stone him (v. 6). David has entered into the grief of his people and then moved beyond the grief into faithful, saving action.

30:11–15. The story moves from David's high resolve and grand strategy to the specificity of one war-weary, abandoned straggler. The Bible characteristically moves from broad theological claim to concrete human reality. Yahweh has promised David, "You shall surely overtake" (v. 8). As it turns out, the means of keeping that promise of God is this straggler upon whom David's people stumble. The man is alone, abandoned by his troops to die (v. 13). David's company, which is accustomed to recruiting hopeless, isolated outsiders, welcomes him and cares for him. As a result, the man's vitality returns (v. 12). This recovered man is able to issue a complete intelligence report, a report containing the turning point of the episode; he has been with the Amalekites. David seeks the man's assistance in his pursuit of "this band." Without hesitation the man is willing to cooperate with his new friends (v. 15).

30:16–20. The actual disposal of the Amalekites is predictable in its efficiency and ruthlessness. The Amalekites are presented in verse 16 with an extra rhetorical flourish designed to make them as unattractive as possible. They are “eating and drinking and dancing,” surely the marks of a degenerate people who practice excessive self-indulgence (cf. Ex. 32:6). Because David’s company is made up of economically marginal people (cf. 22:2), the self-indulgence of the Amalekites is certain to evoke deep resentment. Moreover, the cause and occasion for the celebration is “great spoil,” part of which comes from Judah (v. 16). The Amalekites are to be despised because their celebration is directly at the expense of these marginal people. The narrative asserts that the Amalekites thrive on what is rightly “ours”!

David’s triumph over the Amalekites is massive, bloody, and total (v. 17), befitting Yahweh’s promise (v. 8). Everything is recovered, people and property. Moreover, David seizes flocks and herds. The narrative offers no criticism of David for taking spoil, even from the Amalekites. Indeed, criticism of David is beyond the horizons of this narrative. David is celebrated, first because he has a clear mandate from Yahweh and second because he enacts Israel’s resentment-filled dream of a time when Israel is no longer vulnerable and exploited.

An outsider might observe that David is more ruthless than the Amalekites, for they “killed no one” (v. 2), while David smote them. The narrative, however, is not for outsiders. It is for insiders, those committed to and smitten with David, who find in David the desperate fulfillment of the dreams of this company that has been too long exploited. It is only because of David that the abuse and exploitation of Israel by the Amalekites will stop.

The higher irony in the narrative is to contrast the powerful David with the absent Saul. Saul’s great miscalculation is that he did not carry out Yahweh’s fierce wrath against the Amalekites. Saul did not “utterly destroy” but saved the king and the cattle (15:9). For this Saul stands under an enduring curse (cf. 28:18). His taking of spoil violated a deep and old principle. David, however, is permitted to act differently. It is as though David has now transcended the old torah regulations. It is not only acknowledged that David took spoil, but the taking is celebrated. Israel says proudly, “This is David’s spoil” (v. 20). The Amalekites are resented for taking spoil; Saul is rejected for taking spoil; David is saluted and

championed for doing the same! David is subject to none of the restrictions, held accountable to none of the old norms.

The narrative asserts that David is a new thing in Israel. Partly the newness wrought by David is possible because Samuel is dead and the old party of stringency has failed. The narrative asserts that a new mood in Israel embraces the good world of well-being, and Israel will have its share in that good world. Mainly, however, the difference is David. It is David who gives Israel a liberated, buoyant perception of reality. David breaks old patterns, partly in generosity and compassion, partly in ruthlessness and relentlessness. This eighth nobody of a son has now seized power. He is in charge. He makes all things new in Israel, and no one dares or wants to make a criticism.

30:21–25. The capacity and readiness of David to forge new social policy and procedure is immediately evident in the culmination of this narrative. David's strategy with his six hundred men was to attack with four hundred and leave two hundred behind (v. 10). Standard military convention seems to have been that the ones who actually fought and ran the risk of battle were the ones who got the booty from battle. It is a commonsense pattern of reward. Those from the battle were not inclined to share the booty with those who stayed safely with the baggage (v. 22).

Such a convention, however, fails to reckon with the newness of David. David intervenes and determines that all share equally, those who fought and those who stayed behind (vv. 23–24). David authorizes a new convention (v. 25). The new arrangement is not a one-time thing but becomes normative in Israel under David.

The preservation of this act in the text indicates that David's decision was important and controversial. David is not only a warrior; now he begins to act the part of the king, to dispense justice. It must have been politically dangerous to take this act, for he risked alienating the military. It was a risk like voting against a veterans' pension in U.S. politics. David nonetheless enacts a new policy. In his Robin Hood fashion, David has engaged in raids in the south in order to redress the inequity between haves and have-nots (22:2). It is extraordinary that he continues this same redress even in his own community.

This simple, dangerous act by David introduces into Israel a notion of justice in which economic goods are distributed on a new basis. To be sure,

such a vision of justice and equity is deeply rooted in the Mosaic tradition. The concrete enactment of such a vision into political reality, however, is a bold and unsettling act of leadership. The old basis had been that the strong control and dominate the distribution. After all, who stayed behind with the baggage? It was the “exhausted” (v. 10), the weak, tired, frightened, failed. From the perspective of war policy, they were not entitled to spoil because they did not risk. David insists on equal shares for all, for now the basis of distribution is not risk or victory or machismo but simply membership in the community.

David could remember what it was like to be the eighth, last son. Perhaps the tradition wants him to remember what it was like to be left behind with the baggage (17:22). Indeed, David’s company is made up of those who are “left behind.” David enacts the conviction that those left behind will no longer be treated as second-class citizens. The last ones will be treated like the first.

It is a long way from David to the risks of Jesus’ new thing. Nevertheless, this episode calls to mind the parable of Matthew 20:1–16, in which all workers get the same pay. The householder brusquely dismisses criticism by saying:

Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?
Matthew 20:14–15

And then the terse conclusion (v. 16):

So the last will be first, and the first last.

This Matthean text is a parable of the kingdom. Our narrator has some sense that with David a new kingdom is at hand. Israel is at the threshold of the last becoming first. The new king orders a new social possibility.

30:26–31. David continues to share. David is no doubt generous; his generosity, however, is never in conflict with his calculations. In his success, David remembers the others. He remembers his allies, who are the “elders of Judah,” the chiefs of various southern tribes and clans, those who are to be his power base as he struggles with the party of Saul (cf. II Sam. 19:41–43).

David's generosity is no doubt intended to create political options and possibilities for himself in future. While the narrative understands David to be headed toward the throne, David in this chapter makes no explicit royal claim for himself. Here he is only engaged in preliminary work to provide a basis for his later claim of power. Here David is content to articulate a series of we-they contrasts between the "enemies of Yahweh" and the "friends of Yahweh" (v. 26). It is of course crucial that the "friends of Yahweh" are also the friends of David. In this subtle way the narrator presents David as the carrier of Yahweh's intention for the future.

The narrative builds to its conclusion by making Hebron the last mentioned place (v. 31). While last named, Hebron will be first when David finally comes to power. This narrative anticipates the offer of kingship made to David and the reception of power in Hebron in II Samuel 2:1–4.

In the end, the elders agree to David's kingship and to his base of power in Hebron. In this narrative, we are shown that David's power is based in calculating generosity. We understand why the elders trusted him, why they regarded him as first among equals, why they did not for a moment fear that he would "take, take, take" (cf. I Sam. 8:11–18). David is marvelously presented as a giver, not a taker. It is his propensity to give that makes his new kingdom possible.

Chapter 30 is a story of human success, generosity, and power. It is a David story. It is, however, anchored in verse 6, where David's strength is said to be in Yahweh, and in verse 8, where Yahweh offers assurance. David's daring and generous acts are reckoned to be acts sanctioned and authorized as acts of Yahweh.

I Samuel 31

Samuel's Prophecy Is Fulfilled

We approach this chapter with a sense of relief. We know Saul's demise and death are coming; they were mandated by Samuel long ago (13:14; 15:21). Saul's end has been confirmed explicitly by "Samuel revisited" (28:19). Nonetheless, we are not ready for this pitiful death when it happens. Moreover, one may surmise that the narrator is not in fact ready for Saul's death either. The portrayal of this death, so long in coming, so theologically assured, is wondrously understated. There is no gloating by the David party. There is no rush to move to the next stage of Israel's history. There is no heavy verdict passed on Saul. The action is permitted to have its own say. The chapter might be approached as a study in the reality of death, in the costly fact of being alive and using power, in the relentlessness of death as it derives from the shape of our life.

31:1–7. As Samuel promised, the Philistines fight Israel (cf. 28: 19). This event is nothing new in the life of Israel. At the very outset of our study (chs. 4–6), the Philistines are present and dangerous. Nothing has changed about that brute fact. Saul has not greatly altered the Philistine threat, nor has the new institution of kingship been noticeably effective against the Philistines. The narrative concerns Saul, but his death is not in a vacuum. Israel is under massive assault, and the dead pile up quickly. Like a memorial service, the text names the dead of Saul's family: "Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchishua" (v. 2). There may have been many more loyal comrades, but they are not named and they do not belong in this scene. It is the sons of the king who are named. After the death of his sons, Saul comes into lonely focus. In this instant there are not even Philistines present. There is only Saul and his death.

Astonishingly, even at this moment, Saul can still choose. More amazingly, he is willing to choose. He has been mostly immobilized through this long narrative, so embattled he saw no choice, or so fearful he would not choose. Now, in this last desperate moment, Saul can discern his true situation. His options are clear. He prefers to die rather than be

humiliated and tortured by the Philistines (v. 4). There is no self-pity here, but courage. The courage is matched (and perhaps evoked) by his contempt for the Philistines (v. 4). Saul is a man with a last heroic gesture. He does not want to kill himself, for that is not the course a bold warrior would choose. He therefore asks his single remaining aide to kill him, but the armor-bearer will not obey, either out of respect or devotion or fear (v. 4). The text reports fear, but we do not know if it means fear to touch the Lord's anointed or fear of the dread act of killing. What counts is the refusal.

Saul still has options, and he chooses again. Saul does not comment or speak or explain or justify. No doubt he has little time left. Swiftly and wordlessly, he falls on his sword. For so long, Saul has relied on his weapons. Now his weapon is useful at last only for his own end. Whether from cowardice or solidarity, Saul's armor-bearer dies next (v. 5).

The narrator draws a summary that is majestic in its terseness: "Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together" (v. 6). The sentence must be spoken slowly. There must be a pause with each phrase to grasp the massiveness of the death, its finality, and its majesty. Saul could not live. Early on, it was destined that he would die a failure. The narrator, so devoted to David, does not cheat Saul out of a compelling death.

Verse 7 indicates what the death of the king meant to Israel. The death evoked a complete loss of confidence, even of identity (v. 7). Without a king, even this pitiful king, Israel is hopeless. The territory was quickly claimed by the Philistines. There is no king, and Israel is without hope. David is still in Ziklag at the time of Saul's death. The narrator creates a wonderful hiatus. David is safer to be far away, for the distance leaves him clearly unimplicated in Saul's death. In terms of narrative strategy, we may also credit the narrator with enough grace and dignity to give Saul his own full scene, without being crowded by David.

31:8–13. In the end, Saul is humiliated and then honored. Both acts are necessary to understand Israel's pathos-filled narrative about this tall king. It would be less than honest if the humiliation were not reported, and the telling of the humiliation is useful to David. It makes the continuing threat of the Philistines real. But the honoring must also be told. Saul may have failed. He may have been fated to fail, but he died trying to be a king, and

he is in the end treated like a king. He is not a successful king. He is, however, an oddly faithful king. His loyal people do not forget.

The Philistines come to strip the slain (vv. 8–10). It is probably conventional practice to take what can be taken from the dead. The narrative reads as though the Philistines were not looking for Saul. Perhaps they did not know of his death. They had wondered why Israel was so chaotic, but they did not know that the king had died. Perhaps they were able to identify the king not only by his height but by his special armor (17:38).

The death of an enemy king, when discovered, is good news. Strategically, the king's death means that the military threat has lost its main force. Theologically, it means that the enemy god has been defeated, for when the king dies, the king's god has failed. There is nothing personal in all this about Saul. It is simply a standard military estimate made by the Philistines whereby Saul is reduced to an unimportant marginal participant. The Philistine gods seemed to have defeated Yahweh in chapters 4–5. Now that defeat is real. The Philistines share the “gospel” (v. 9) with their people. They make a religious claim. The gods of the Philistines have won. Every people somehow links the military and the political to the religious. The body of Saul is simply spoil for the Philistine gods. Yahweh is as humiliated as is Saul.

The final sentences do not change the reality (vv. 11–13). Saul is still dead. The Philistines have still won. Israel is still in distress. Nonetheless, there are gestures of human fidelity and decency that must be performed. Saul long ago had intervened to save Jabesh-gilead from the Ammonites (11:1–15). The people of Jabesh-gilead have not forgotten. Others, including the Davidic narrator, may have regarded Saul as a fated failure. In that particular community of the rescued, however, Saul is remembered as he was: savior, deliverer, larger than life, willing to risk himself on their behalf. The people of Jabesh-gilead come with resolve, perhaps at some risk. They are not afraid to be identified with this dead king. They take the body and rescue it from humiliation. They rescue the memory of Saul from mockery and dismissal. They remember his fidelity and the way he changed their life and their future, and they respond in kind (cf. II Sam. 2:5–7).

The first book of Samuel ends in a cemetery with a tamarisk tree in Jabesh. One can imagine the flag, state honors, perhaps taps. Saul's life was not a success, but it could hardly be counted a failure. Now this man,

tormented and driven crazy by the rush of history past him, is at peace. The respect and dignity accorded Saul are not unlike that later caring removal of another body (John 19:38–42). This time, with Saul, there will be no immediate Easter, as there was to be with Jesus. There is, however, a waiting in Israel. The narrator would not have us believe that Saul's death nullifies the hope of Hannah.

The Philistines may relish for a brief moment their "good news." That Philistine "good news," however, could not last. The real news was to come from "the other side," from this God who had presided so sternly over the life and rule of Saul. This other God still intends a future that Israel can scarcely imagine and the Philistines will be unable to resist. Israel's waiting at the death of Saul is for David. Israel's waiting at the end of I Samuel is for the bouyant account of David in II Samuel.

II Samuel 1—4

The Question of Saul's Successor

The canonical division of I and II Samuel is appropriately marked by the death of Saul. Critical scholarship, however, is nearly unanimous in its judgment that the first four chapters of II Samuel are a continuation of the literary unit beginning in I Samuel 16. That entire literature traces the rise of David to the monarchy. Thus the literary unit continues through the death of Saul and therefore from First into Second Samuel. The death of Saul is crucial for this larger literary unit, but it is not the central point of the literature. Rather, the literature is predominantly concerned with how David became king.

With the death of Saul, there is no king. There may have been a number of claimants for the throne, but priority must surely be given to the house of Saul, to his descendants, and to his strongest and most important ally, Abner. Against the Saulide priority, this literature argues that David is the natural, obvious, and Yahweh-willed successor to Saul. David's claim was not everywhere acknowledged or recognized, however. Thus the problem to which the literature must now address itself is the transfer of legitimacy. It must demonstrate that David is not only a proper candidate but *the* legitimate successor to Saul. Second Samuel 1–4 addresses that problem, which must be handled with political delicacy and literary finesse.

II Samuel 1:1–16

This odd chapter serves as a transitional piece. It is odd because it parallels I Samuel 31 in important ways yet in other ways contradicts that chapter. David remains in Ziklag (cf. I Sam. 30:26–31), still out of the way of the dangerous action, still completely unimplicated in the Saul debacle (30:1). Is David perhaps like Charles DeGaulle, patiently waiting, knowing that sooner or later the nation must turn to him because it has no alternative?

1:1–10. A messenger comes. He is a surprising figure, bedraggled, obviously a bearer of a great grief. His initial gesture is a deep bow, the kind made even by calculating Abigail (v. 2; I Sam. 25:23). The man has news, which he delivers in two parts. First he gives the summary report, the defeat of Israel, the death of Saul, the death of Jonathan (v. 4). Then he becomes more specific. David asks for details (v. 5). There is no reason for David to be suspicious of the report. Rather, David needs to hear its specifics, which must have evoked mixed emotions. Even though this turn of events provides David with his chance for the throne, it is difficult to imagine David, even at his most cynical, wanting a massive defeat of Israel in order to advance his own interests.

The messenger has now delivered his central message. Saul is dead (v. 4). The details are still lacking. When the messenger gives a more detailed account, everything about Saul's death immediately becomes complex and troubled (vv. 6–10). Only now do we learn that the messenger is the king's killer (v. 10). He killed Saul, he asserts, because Saul was already mortally wounded. Our suspicions are not yet aroused by this killer-become-messenger. Finally, at the end of verse 10, we get a fuller picture of what has happened. It is at last clear that this killer-messenger is a cool customer—able to kill a king, strip a dead body, seize what is royal, and rush away to Ziklag to a waiting claimant of the throne. He brings to David the symbols of royal legitimacy, crown and amulet. He imagines he is single-handedly making a king, a new king, and giving him legitimacy through the accouterments of royalty. The narrative stays with the words of the messenger and his descriptive account. It does not probe or even acknowledge suspicion about his motives. Did all this happen accidentally, or is this a self-serving scavenger? We are not told. Surely those who stood in David's presence watched and waited to see how the king would respond to this good news, so ominously given.

1:11–16. The transition from verse 10 to verse 11 is a breathtaking moment in the narrative. Now David must give answer to the killer-become-legitimator. The news of Saul's death cannot be unwelcome to David. Saul is dead, and David, happily, is not in any way implicated. This is a moment when a lesser person might have rejoiced and thanked the bearer of good tidings. David, however, is not a lesser person. David responds not in glee but in pathos, for the king is dead.

David does not respond as the messenger expected. David is without the joy to which he may be entitled in this moment. He is without the hoped-for gratitude. From the awesome news of a slain king comes David's immediate, seemingly uncalculated grief (v. 11). David thinks, first, not that his own way to power is now open but, rather, that the king is dead.

David does not celebrate. The David of this narrative is so compelling and convincing because there is an astonishing congruity between David's personal inclination and his political perceptiveness. David grieves, and all his company grieve with him (v. 11). They grieve for Saul, for Jonathan, for the people of Yahweh, for the house of Israel (v. 12). David has enough for which to grieve for a long time.

In his grief, however, David is not remiss in his responsibility. He queries the messenger once more. The messenger is waiting for a reward, foolishly imagining he has delivered the crown to David, thinking wrongly that David would gladly receive the throne from his hand. The messenger is an outsider. He cannot know that the crown is given only by God, not by a murdering stranger. David is presented as the one in the narrative who correctly discerns what is happening, which the other completely misunderstands.

David has already asked the man his identity (v. 8). David seems not to have listened, however, so now he asks again. Of all people, the man is an Amalekite (v. 13)! Again at a troubled place in Saul's life, even at his death, an Amalekite appears. It is as though the story of Israel's kingship is fated to have these harsh, unfortunate, Amalekite intrusions.

David's response to the messenger is firm, authoritative, decisive, and loyal to Saul (vv. 14–16). He immediately rebukes the outrageous behavior of the Amalekite who has violated "the Lord's anointed." David himself has been endlessly respectful of "the LORD's anointed" (24:6; 26:9). By contrast, this outsider does not know about Saul's religious legitimacy. His ignorance, however, does not protect him from David's anger. The man had expected a handsome reward from David. Instead, his reward is death. David's grief ends in a harsh verdict. The hope of the Amalekite ends in an execution. The transfer of power, even if willed by God, is clumsily wrought. Characteristically, however, David survives the clumsy transfer, according to the narrator, innocent and unscathed. Indeed, David's treatment of the Amalekite permits David to evidence both his innocence and his loyalty.

Chapter 1 contains a version of Saul's death that contradicts the one in I Samuel 31. Many scholars regard this version as a fabrication and regard I Samuel 31 as an authentic historical account. That is, the Amalekite is lying in order to ingratiate himself with David. On this reading, the Amalekite is simply a scavenger who happened upon the royal insignia and confiscated them. In fact there is no way to adjudicate the question of the historicity of either narrative. We do not have any firm data by which to sort out and assess the two reports. The important point for interpretation is not the issue of facticity. What claims our attention is the intention of the narrative. The Amalekite account must be taken on its own terms. Whether the story is factual or not, within the framework of the account the Amalekite is telling the truth. He killed Saul, and David accepts his report at face value. David has no other data. This is the only report he receives. Indeed, David executes the man on the basis of his own testimony. The narrative is perhaps not concerned with who killed Saul. It is rather preoccupied with David's faithful, magisterial response to Saul's death. David grieves and acts for the sake of Saul's honor.

Here, as elsewhere, David is at pains to avoid bloodguilt, or even the appearance of bloodguilt. David, in this narrative, is unambiguous. The guilt of this blood, the blood of the anointed, belongs to the Amalekite (v. 16). David in this act has avenged Saul and has presented himself as the faithful caretaker of the royal office (cf. 21:1–14).

II Samuel 1:17–27

David's lament over Saul and Jonathan is powerful, passionate poetry commonly regarded as being directly from David's hand. Its directness, passion, and innocence are reflective of a genuine grief not inappropriate to David, who had lived with Saul so long and loved Jonathan so deeply. In this poetry, placed in the mouth of David, we have a deeply moving, pathos-filled personal statement that is at the same time a magisterial statement of public reality.

When Israel witnesses David in his grief, it sees David in his fullest, most faithful, most powerful form. This poem marks a deep, precious, and hurtful moment in the life of Israel. As much as is possible for any candidate for the throne, we may imagine this poetry is genuinely

disinterested. David does not know what will come next. For the length of the song, at least, all the dangerous ambiguity of David's future is bracketed out. There is a moratorium on power for the full honoring of grief. Such poetry serves to give the community time, space, and means whereby to treasure and to relinquish.

I submit that this poem is a useful model for public grief among us. We have nearly lost our capacity for such grief. We are characteristically so busy with power, so bent on continuity, so mesmerized by our ideologies of control that we will not entertain a hiatus in our control of life to allow for grief. Such grief does for a moment require a relinquishment of control. David does not hesitate to enact such relinquishment.

Although we may have lost our capacity for public grief, we still know from interpersonal relations that where loss is not grieved there are barriers to newness. In Israel this loss to the Philistines is nobly and honestly grieved. There is no cover-up. The Saul period in Israel was not noble, but it was an episode of passion and significance. Through the eloquence of David, Israel lingers in the loss, lingers without resolution or manipulation, lingers in the grief, unashamed. This grief is something the Philistines could not imagine. It is certainly something the pitiful Amalekite could not have envisioned. He had come with visions of celebration, but he did not know of David's (and Israel's) distinctive capacity for pathos.

1:17–20. David sings with abandonment of the splendor of Saul and Jonathan and the enormous loss Israel now faces. The beauty, loveliness, and possibility of Israel have in this moment of death and defeat been lost. No doubt the language is hyperbolic, but it is not dishonest hyperbole. Rather, it is a liberated grieving in which Israel is permitted to give full expression to this moment of extraordinary defeat. We as spectators have been so caught up in the struggle between Saul and David that we might miss what Saul's death means to Israel. Even given Samuel's rejection of Saul, Saul has been king. Now the king and the prince have died. Something precious and decisive in Israel is gone and will never return. David, in his ability to turn the rhetoric completely away from himself, makes it possible for Israel to embrace its loss fully. "How are the mighty fallen!" (v. 19b) provides the powerful line of refrain that will be reiterated in verses 25 and 27. The purpose of the lament is to contrast then and now, as it was and as it is now (Jahnow). Then Israel was mighty; now there is

defeat. The present death is so devastating because the previous heroism had been so evident. Now the glory of that heroism is gone. The contrast, of what was and what is, is deep and obvious.

Only Israel can understand what this loss means. An outsider can never know. Outsiders must leave a family or a clan to its grief, because outsiders will always misconstrue. David is sure that the Philistines in particular will not understand (v. 20). Indeed, if the Philistines learn of the death of Saul and Jonathan (as surely they will), they will turn the occasion into joy and celebration (cf. I Sam. 31:9). Joy at the death of the king and celebration in the face of this unutterable loss are indeed an obscenity. This dread of Philistine joy at Israelite grief bespeaks the deep repulsion felt by Israel toward the Philistines. From an Israelite perspective, these uncircumcised outsiders are a nonpeople who will engage in such a vile response to Saul's death and Israel's defeat because they understand nothing and have no capacity for recognizing greatness. Such nonpeople can only distort and defile the reality of this people.

1:21. The poem recalls that it was in the great battle of Mount Gilboa that death came in Israel (I Sam. 31:1). That mountain is now held accountable for the death. The accountability is seen in the fact that the death of the anointed of Yahweh has contaminated the place where the death occurred. The mountain, as the locus of death, is now "defiled." Perhaps the mountain is only invited to share in the grief. The decree that there should be no dew or rain on the mountain suggests, however, that the mountain is placed under curse. Either way, Gilboa is the ignoble place where the king was murdered, the anointed defiled, and the greatness of Saul disregarded.

1:22–23. In these verses the poetry becomes more intense and personal. A sharp contrast is suggested between "the bow of Jonathan" and "sword of Saul" and "the blood of the slain" and "fat of the mighty." The phrases take us vividly into the clash of battle. We can envision sword spilling blood, bow cutting fat. This honored king and his son did not wince in the face of brutal conflict. The poet knows this deathliness has now taken those most treasured in Israel.

Verse 23 backs off from the sounds and brutality of the battle to envision Saul and Jonathan in better days, before Saul's paranoia, before the deathliness. We see the two together, father and son, treasured in Israel,

attractive in their appearance, united. The poetry of grief looks past the rancors of father and son, the deception of the son and the rage of the father. Those gossip-driven tensions are now unimportant. Death has a way of permitting us to focus on the larger realities, to transcend the details of hurt and affront. Together this team was swift and strong, outflying eagles, outmuscling lions. Grief has a way of focusing the picture, permitting in hyperbolic expression what is true and best remembered.

1:24–25a. The daughters of Israel, perhaps the professional grievers (cf. Amos 5:16), are invited to grieve, just as the “daughters of the Philistines” are precluded (v. 20). Israel is summoned to provide its best grief for its deepest loss. The social constitution of this group of mourners deserves our careful notice. The rich, affluent, and well-off in Israel, who have thought themselves immune from trouble, are required to join the weeping (v. 24). They are mandated to leave off their glad rags, and embody the end of greatness. Their emotional posture and their public appearance must be aligned with the reality of Israel’s loss. Party clothes would be an act of unbearable denial of the loss and will not be permitted. The refrain follows the call for weeping: “The mighty have fallen” (v. 25). As the mighty have fallen, so the well-dressed are to undress, to give liturgic imitation to the denuding of the splendor of Israel.

1:25b–27. After the public summons of verse 24, the poet returns in verses 25b–26 to the intimate reflection of verses 22–23. It is striking that the dead ones are named so often. The naming is itself an act of grief and resolution. The words are so specific that they dare for a moment to ignore the king and focus only on Jonathan (vv. 25b–26a). It is now Jonathan—brother, ally, advocate, the one whom David loved as he loved himself—who is evoked. The words cannot say all that needs to be said. Jonathan’s life is a cause of amazement, his love has been deeper and more precious than that of a wife. The words “pleasant and lovely” are repeated from verse 23. The first word bespeaks physical attractiveness, a trait he shared with David himself (cf. I Sam. 16:12). The second word expresses an elemental devotion, a devotion he shared distinctively with David. Taken together the two words articulate a peculiar and precious bonding with David.

David is uninhibited about this friendship in which personal solidarity is not simply political usefulness. This poetry is the speech of one who knows

utter loss and who finds powerful words to match the loss. The refrain recurs at the end of the poem (v. 27). The words of the poem are simultaneously intimate and public. The contemptible daughters of Philistia, the bereft mountain of Gilboa, the well-off maidens of Israel are all summoned to grief. At the end, however, the poet is left alone. The defeat is final, and life is closed.

Interpretive words cannot catch the power, anguish, and pathos present in the poem of verses 19–27. We may, however, identify three guides to its interpretation. First, words matter. Sound religion is so often a matter of finding the right words, words that will let us genuinely experience, process, and embrace the edges of our life. The cruciality of words needs to be at the center of the church's life, for we live in a culture that grows mute by our commitment to technique. The dominant ideology of our culture wants to silence all serious speech, cover over all serious loss, and deny all real grief. Such a silencing is accomplished through the reduction of life to technique that promises satiation. But such a muteness will leave us numb, unable to hope or to care. Against such an ideological urging, speech like this poem is a bold, daring, subversive alternative. It is an assertion and enactment of the conviction that our humanness may not and must not be silenced. When there are no longer real words, but only clichés and slogans, life is that much more diminished. This poem is an occasion for the celebration of David as the one with the right words, for the recognition that the Bible is a book for our strange, honest speaking about life's "limits" (Ricoeur, pp. 122, 144, 148).

Second, we can focus on David's remarkable capacity to sort out what is crucial from what is marginal. The moment of Saul's defeat is, in David's life, beset by fear, guilt, enmity, and possibility. Within this moment of grief, however, David is able to get his mind off himself and instead to focus with and for his community on the public reality of loss. David is not so consumed by ambition that he cannot linger over the greatness that is grieved. To notice, acknowledge, respect, and give voice to the grief means that life in Israel has not been reduced to ideology and self-interest. David is a man of enormous self-interest. He has, however, the graceful capacity to think outside of and speak beyond himself. He speaks of a greatness he can neither enhance nor diminish.

Third, the prospect of public grief is a scarce practice in our society, where we are so engaged in self-deception, pretending that everything is

“all right.” Underneath that propaganda, however, we are a deeply troubled community with a great deal of unprocessed public hurt. We have no easy way to process hurt, but this poem is a model. For obvious starters, we have yet to finish with the residue of racial hate left from the Civil War. We have scarcely faced the ghosts of anti-Semitism made visible in the Holocaust. We have not yet tapped the horror of Vietnam. We have yet to acknowledge that our long history of wars is not a set of triumphs but an endless process of “bow against fat,” of “sword into blood,” of death for the lovely and beloved. The earth, like Gilboa, stands deeply cursed. The voice of contemptuous Philistines mock in their outsider status. The purveyors of haughtiness on the inside only go on shopping and consuming and do not notice.

This text is a noticing, and its noticing places hard questions before us. What permits one to notice the grief and loss of life around us? How can we break in on our muteness? How can we acknowledge the triumph of brutality in our self-deception? When shall we find words, and who dares sing of intimacy broken, of loss unspoken that must be spoken, of greatness overwhelmed by the savage power of death? David sings about the poignancy of human anguish. These questions may find their buoyant answer if we join the song of relentless, candid faith.

Where there is such singing, the unresolved hurt can be resolved. Where there is not such singing, we are more like the Philistines in our self-deception; we die in our uncircumcision. This singing is an act of lyrical skill and of political courage. It is also an act of stunning humanness. We speak too early and too often of David dancing before the ark in his joyous nakedness. Here is the man utterly naked in his grief, which is also the grief of his people. David knows that in the loss of his king, his brother, his advocate, there is a loss in which all of us lose. David and Israel are driven to long, slow singing, because there is no other language to claim what belongs to us, what cannot be denied or defeated. There is in Israel honest singing in the midst of death. Israel is largely defeated, but not yet muted. Where the muteness of death has not triumphed, Israel can notice the hurt, embrace the defeat, and eventually act beyond the loss. How like David we could be! How unlike David we are in our ideological, technological muteness. We imagine that the mighty do not fall, that the glory is not slain. We imagine if we do not say it, the Philistines will not notice. David knew better, sang better, and acted better. And so could we!

II Samuel 2:1–4a

After David has properly and genuinely grieved the end of Saul, the narrative turns abruptly to the future. David has been discreet and reticent while Saul lived, but no more. There is a vacancy on the throne and David makes his move. He is on the way to power ... and to Jerusalem.

One is struck with the abruptness of verse 1. Immediately after the funeral, David is prepared to act. He is still in his private refuge of Ziklag (1:1), but now it is safe to go back to the territory of Israel. He must return if he is to be a factor in the new settlements of power that are sure to come. At the outset, David's charge to power is shaped as an act of obedience. His first step is not recruitment, strategy, or public relations. It is to inquire of Yahweh (v. 1). David makes no move without Yahweh's guidance. Yahweh is immediately and positively responsive: "Go up. Go up to Hebron." Hebron is a centrally located city in the south where David has carried on his calculating, ingratiating raids (I Sam. 25:1–8; 27:8; 30:26–31). Notice that chapter 2 is bounded by references to Hebron (vv. 1, 32). Hebron is the center of Judah and David's first seat of power. Hebron is among the cities that shared in David's rich booty (I Sam. 30:31).

In obedience to Yahweh, David goes to Hebron. He goes with a considerable company. His procession is a show of power and determination. We are given no clue to the negotiations that went on with the powers of Judah. We are given only the conclusion: The men of Judah "anointed David king" (v. 4; cf. I Sam. 30:26). David is anointed a second time (cf. I Sam. 16:13). This time it is a public, popular, political act; there is no hint of religious sanction. The act is in every way contrasted to the earlier secret act of Samuel. This public act has immediate public effectiveness. David has long been currying the favor of the south. Now the men of Judah give visible public reality to the anointing long ago authorized by Yahweh.

II Samuel 2:4b–32

David's difficult and persistent problem is the north, the tribes of Israel and especially Benjamin. Saul may be dead, but the Saul movement is by no means dead. The tribes of the north will not automatically rush to a new loyalty in the south. David must use a great deal of energy to win northern

support. Indeed, the much later crisis of I Kings 12 suggests that the Davidic hold on the north is never deeply established. In our chapter we are given two episodes of David's attentiveness to the north. One (vv. 4b–7) is a peaceable act of friendship. The other (vv. 8–32) is an act of confrontation and hostility. The advance of David's cause is precisely an odd juxtaposition of friendship and hostility.

2:4b–7. Jabesh-gilead was a special city for Saul; rescue of that city first called public attention to him (I Sam. 11:1–11). Indeed, Saul had done a courageous and generous act of rescuing that city from the Ammonites. The people of Jabesh-gilead did not forget. They rescued the body of Saul after his final humiliation at Beth-shan, and it is in this city and by their hand that Saul was respectfully buried (I Sam. 31:11–13). Jabesh-gilead had good and obvious reasons for being “Saul country.” It does not surprise us that loyalty to the Saul party would continue in Jabesh-gilead.

David acts with nerve and discernment toward this Saulide city. He immediately makes a play for its loyalty and support. In so doing, he seeks to cut to the heart of the Saul constituency. When David learns of Jabesh-gilead's last act of loyalty to Saul in honoring his body (v. 4b), he sends an extended message. First, he commends Jabesh-gilead for its *hesed* to Saul (v. 5). At some risk, the city had acted in loyalty. Then David wishes for the “steadfast love and faithfulness” (*hesed we'emet*) of Yahweh to be upon their city (v. 6). David escalates the rhetoric about *hesed* so that his wish is not merely for human solidarity (as in their action toward Saul) but for solidarity of Yahweh. It is as though David reminds the city that it can expect no more *hesed* from Saul, who is dead and has no more *hesed* to give, but may find adequate *hesed* in the enduring inclination of Yahweh.

In a skillful move, David then promises he will do “good” for them. The term “good” (*tobah*) is a rough synonym for *hesed* (Moran). David proposes that the new loyalty the city wants can come only from Yahweh. David, however, is the concrete mode of Yahweh's fidelity. That is, David himself is the best source of support, defense, and security for these people who have lost their Benjaminite advocate. David promises to this Saul community a better friendship, a “more excellent way.”

On the basis of his promise, David summons Jabesh-gilead to join his cause, for he has been made king (v. 7). This is an exceedingly shrewd

approach. It is not coercive or threatening, it is honest and straightforward. David identifies himself as the best prospect for the future. David needs northern support, but his proposal is not merely a one-way deal. The proposed alliance would also be in the best interests of the city. Moreover, David's offer of "good" is a way through which Yahweh's *hesed we'emet* are mediated. David, according to his own words, is an offer of Yahweh's solidarity. David is Saul's rightful successor as the vehicle for *hesed*.

2:8–32. Along with the new king's prospect for friendship and loyalty in the north, there is also the reality of hostility. The powerful legacy of Saul is at work in the north in the person of Abner, Saul's military leader. Abner is the acknowledged strong man and kingmaker of the north. His authorization of Ishbosheth as Saul's son and heir (vv. 8–9) is wonderfully contrasted with David's southern enthronement (v. 4). The "men of Judah" make David king. It was a popular act. By contrast, it is Abner who "made Ishbosheth king" (v. 9). The kingship of the north is an inside job for which no popular support is reported. It is Abner, not Ishbosheth, who holds the real power (see I Sam. 26:13–16 for David's first playful encounter with Abner).

Abner, the de facto ruler of the north, and Joab, David's tough military man, meet (vv. 12–13). One does not know if it is a summit for negotiation, an accidental confrontation, or an intentional military encounter. There is deep tension between the two senior commanders. They each come with an entourage of support, but the drama is in the more personal rivalry (vv. 12–13).

The narrative, through the initiative of Abner, loses no time in acting out this deep rivalry (v. 14). What appears to be an innocent proposal is in fact a serious and intense challenge that could be refused only in cowardice. The proposal sounds innocent—"Let the young men arise and play"—but the "young men" are strapping soldiers, the best available. "Play" is also a misleading word, for it refers to a struggle to the death. Abner's proposal is that the contest of strength be limited to designated "players," thus limiting the danger. The seeming playfulness of verse 14 is belied by the conclusion in verse 17 that "the battle was very fierce." Indeed, it was so fierce that all "fell down together" (v. 16). The scene concludes with a report that Abner's side lost, but the general impression is of an outcome so devastating that no one won (v. 17).

Abner's scheme was intended to contain the hostility, but the scheme did not work. The narrator indicates an escalation in the conflict by the abrupt introduction of the sons of Zeruah: Joab, Abishai, Asahel (v. 18). These are the ruthless devotees of David who always smell blood (cf. I Sam. 26:6–9; II Sam. 3:39; 16:9). Asahel receives particular attention in this narrative. We are told only one detail about him: He is fast (v. 18)! He uses his uncommon speed to pursue Abner (v. 19). The deep tension between the two parties is evident in the face-to-face conversation (vv. 20–22).

Abner is not as fast and cannot escape. He is bold and brave, however, and in his masterful self-control he is condescendingly gracious. Asahel is fast, but that is all. He is impetuous and foolish. Abner understands that Asahel wants blood, so Abner offers him some blood. He offers one of his young men, which should satisfy Asahel (v. 21). Asahel wants only Abner, however; he wants no substitute. Twice Abner warns Asahel (vv. 21, 22). Twice he tells him to desist. Abner is not frightened; he is utterly confident. He does not doubt he will kill Asahel if the issue is forced. Abner does not want the issue forced, because it will only extend and escalate the hostilities. The challenge, however, is a matter of machismo face-saving and Asahel will not quit.

The two are hopelessly enmeshed. Abner is no coward and will not yield. Asahel is committed and cannot afford to back down. The narrative is noticeably partial to Abner. After the warning, the fault is assigned to Asahel: "He refused to turn aside; therefore Abner smote him" (v. 23). As it is reported, Abner had no choice. He did what he said he would do and what he had to do. The narrative is slow and detached about the death. The killing is gruesome. Abner attacks Asahel so that the butt of the spear runs him through. Abner is a strong man, not to be trifled with. Asahel, in Abner's presence, is a fool—and a dead man. The report of verse 23, that the others who rushed to the spot "stood still," suggests that this is an awesome killing of a feared man. The dread of Abner is thick in the place. The narrative does not fault Abner, though. He is a great man, not to be trifled with. The narrative treats Abner with marked respect.

The death of Asahel needs to be honored and avenged. His brothers, Joab and Abishai, pursue Abner. They pursue the blood of vengeance. In the meantime David's throne hangs in the balance. We do not know at this point if the pursuit of Abner will advance David's cause or hinder it.

Abner is not a coward, but he is a man of common sense. He proposes to Joab to stop the deathliness (v. 26). Abner knew he would kill Asahel (v. 22), but he has more respect for Joab. Abner does not say he will kill Joab. He only says there will be killing unless the chase stops. The killing will only lead to more and more trouble. In a deft move, Abner refers to his own people as “brethren” of Joab (v. 26). He affirms the foundational solidarity of the David and Saul parties. The statement is a hint of conciliation, perhaps a settlement on David. Abner does not back off, but there is an opening.

Joab seizes the opening (v. 27). He admits that his men would have kept on until morning, until there was irreversible trouble. Joab must make sure he does not appear weak or intimidated. At the behest of Abner, Joab calls off the attack (v. 28). Abner and his men return to safety across the Jordan (v. 29). Joab and his men return to Hebron (v. 32). All that remains is a body count: Abner 360, David 20 (vv. 30–31). David had won in the initial “play” (vv. 14, 17). Now David has won in the extended struggle (v. 31). David is winning, but he has not yet won. The narrative knows he will win, but he will win at terrible cost. The killing is not yet finished and the new throne is by no means secure. Over all these events lingers the unanswered death of Asahel.

The contrast between the narrative of verses 4b–7 and verses 8–32 is powerful. David proposes to be a bearer of *hesed* (vv. 4b–7), but that narrative of *hesed* toward Jabesh-gilead stands isolated without a future. The immediate future belongs to the Abner-Joab conflict (vv. 8–32). The juxtaposition of *hesed* and “sword” invites a reflection on power and legitimacy, on the reality of blood in the midst of power and the limits of the strategic shedding of blood. The juxtaposition raises the question of how and in what way the vicious cycle of destructive power can ever be broken.

The story of public power is the story of the sword devouring (v. 26). The words are spoken by Abner to Joab as a pathos-filled warning and wish. It is as though this hardened, fearless commander were pleading, “Stop the killing.” It is striking that this phrase, “sword devouring” is twice addressed to Joab. In the first usage, by Abner, the warning causes Joab to stop the killing. In the second usage (11:25), by David, the words are flippant and dismissive. The two uses of the phrase are realistic about the bloody dimension of royal power. They mock Joab as the man at the center

of the killing. This chapter provides no resolution to the north-south Abner-Joab conflict but only gives us a glimpse of the high stakes and the risks yet to be run.

II Samuel 3:1–5

David is on his way to power in Israel, as in Judah. As he comes into the kingdom long promised him, it is important for the narrator to characterize how he received it. David did not seize the kingdom. In Gunn's words (1975), the kingdom was a gift. When David finally arrives at full power, he is innocent and unsullied.

The narrator pauses to provide a reflective comment and to summarize pertinent data from David's seven years in Hebron. The reflective comment serves as a programmatic guide for how the entire story is shaped (v. 1). Our tidy time lines of royal history are misleading. David did not immediately and easily succeed Saul. There was rather a long conflict, during which it was not clear whose name would be next. The open-ended struggle for power, however, does not preclude hints along the way about the outcome. David's eventual accession to power has already been acknowledged in I Samuel in the mouths of Jonathan (23:17), Saul (24:20), Abigail (25:28), and Saul again (26:25). In an understated but unambiguous way, verse 1 makes clear that God's providential intention for David may be delayed but cannot be defeated.

The names of David's sons are given in verses 2–5. While Abigail is the wife with whom we are most familiar, her son will play no role in the story that unfolds in II Samuel. The names that will be important are Amnon (v. 2; cf. chs. 13–14), Absalom (v. 3; cf. chs. 15–19), and Adonijah (v. 4; cf. I Kings 1–2). The sequence of Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah provides an outline for the coming drama. For obvious reasons, Solomon's name is not present. Solomon is born late, not while David is at Hebron (12:24–25). He is a late player in the struggle for power, but he will be the winner. In the meantime we may only note that David functions like a powerful chieftain with many wives, a harbinger of a royal harem to come.

II Samuel 3:6–21

The overriding question for the narrator at this juncture is, How will David win the north, which is still loyal to Saul? We expect the principals in the conflict to be David and Ishbosheth, the legitimate but pitiful heir of Saul. This powerful narrative contradicts our expectations and makes clear that neither David nor Ishbosheth is key to claiming the north. The key is Abner. We have had hints about Abner's cruciality for David's rise. Already in chapter 2, Abner is portrayed as a powerful, disciplined man (2:8–9). In 2:7 David had appealed to the people of Jabesh-gilead, "Let your hands be strong" (*h^zq*). Now in 3:6 we are told, "Abner was making himself strong (*h^zq*) in the house of Saul." Abner is consolidating his personal power.

3:6–11. The triggering action for Abner's defection to David is that Abner had taken one of the concubines of Saul (vv. 7–8). The concubines are a symbol of royal power and authority, no doubt reflecting the notion that royal authority is derived from virility, fruitfulness, and sexual prowess. Saul's death created a power vacuum. Abner makes a preemptive gesture by taking Saul's concubine. There was in Israel no assured dynastic privilege. Ishbosheth had some entitlement, but he would have to substantiate that claim by action—perhaps military, perhaps sexual. Ishbosheth, however, had not acted and apparently could not act. Was he politically too timid, or does the narrative suggest he lacked the sexual courage to seize the concubines?

Abner takes advantage of Ishbosheth's impotence (whatever its cause) and lays claim to the concubine. Ishbosheth is pitiful and stands by helplessly while Abner thus preempts his claim to power. Abner commits a public act of defiance against Ishbosheth, not unlike Absalom's coming defiance of David (16:20–22) and Adonijah's against Solomon (I Kings 2:17–25). No king can passively tolerate such a challenge. Ishbosheth must challenge Abner, and so he accuses Abner of the seizure (v. 7).

Abner responds defiantly to this accusation (v. 8). Abner rebukes Ishbosheth for his lack of gratitude. Abner has been loyal (*hesed*) to Saul's house, practicing the same kind of *hesed* that operated between David and Jonathan. Indeed, Abner's *hesed* has propped up the weak northern regime. Abner has been loyal to the house of Saul, to the brothers, to the friends, when he could have sold out to David (v. 8). He has not sold out.

The dispute over the concubine leads to a major political decision. Abner has kept *hesed* with Ishbosheth, but such will no longer be the case (vv. 9–10). Over the little matter of this woman, Ishbosheth forfeits the loyalty of Abner (which he could not afford to lose). Saul's son cannot win, any more than Saul could win. Any action against Abner, however, is enormously dangerous, because only the presence of Abner retained the throne for Ishbosheth. We should not misunderstand Abner's move. It was not simply a sexual act. It was a defiant public, political challenge that could not be ignored. Was it deliberately provocative on Abner's part, so that Abner could justifiably desert the house of Saul? We do not know. The narrative is abrupt in its move from personal rebuke (v. 7) to personal defiance (v. 8) to public treason (vv. 9–10).

No one, neither Ishbosheth nor the narrator, doubts that Abner has the nerve and political capacity to deliver the north to David. How odd, in prospect of David's encounter with Bathsheba, that David's reception of the northern loyalty depends on or is triggered by a betrayal in personal matters. The odd tension between loyalty and betrayal is not foreign to David, for that has been his story, implicitly with Saul and explicitly with Achish (I Sam. 27). David is a highly complex, not to say ambiguous, character, who benefits from the shattering ugliness of betrayal, which is a convenient contrast to his own innocence.

Finally we learn why Abner is so defiant and why Ishbosheth does not retaliate: "He feared him" (v. 11). Both Ishbosheth and Abner understand that their actual roles are reversed from the roles assigned by protocol. Abner has all the power and all the leverage in the relation. Ishbosheth is helpless and immobilized. Abner is therefore free to negotiate as he chooses. In the end, Saulide power is not defeated. It simply evaporates in fear.

3:12–16. Abner is as good as his defiant word. He immediately enters into negotiations with David to explore terms of delivering the north to David. The action proceeds on the assumption that Ishbosheth is no factor at all. He has already given the throne away. Abner is a hard man with powerful bargaining chips. He wants a covenant (v. 12). He is not a helpless renegade seeking sanctuary but a chieftain of considerable importance. In David, however, Abner meets another hard man who also bargains.

David appears ready to give Abner what he wants ... with one condition. David wants Michal, daughter of Saul, whom he had won (I Sam. 18:20–28) and lost (I Sam. 24:44). Perhaps David sets the condition to test Abner’s seriousness. For Abner to secure Michal requires boldness, not unlike his action with the concubine of Ishbosheth. Most likely David wants the return of Michal to gain legitimacy with the Saulide party. David has his way. Saul’s daughter returns, and Ishbosheth is passively compliant (v. 15). Clearly Abner is the agent for the return of Michal. By verse 16 the one condition has been met, and David is ready to deal with Abner.

3:17–21. Abner now delivers the north, as he had announced to Ishbosheth (vv. 9–10) and promised to David (v. 12). It is remarkable that Abner’s defection from Ishbosheth is presented without ambiguity or reprimand. The reason Abner’s act is not treasonable is that Abner is said only to implement what is already willed by Yahweh (v. 9).

Judged by the faith and interest of the narrator, Abner is only doing the will of God. Abner acts as a vehicle for Yahweh. First Abner confers with the elders of Israel (vv. 17–19). He asserts that his defection to David is God’s will and that only David can defend Israel against the Philistines. Abner need not tell his elders how miserably Saul has failed on the Philistine front, or that no one can imagine that Ishbosheth can succeed.

Next Abner consults with David (vv. 20–21). Abner submits to David in a covenant-making feast, after which Abner departs in “peace,” *šalom* (shalom). The language characterizing Abner’s political maneuvers is the language of solidarity and loyalty. Abner knows about loyalty (v. 8), Abner was ready for covenanting with David (vv. 12–13), and Abner makes covenant possible between Israel and David (v. 21). The covenant agreement assuring David’s rule over the north is not the imposition of royal absolutism but is power based on need, respect, and mutuality. The meeting between David and Abner ends in well-being. Not only is there shalom between David and Israel but Abner departs in shalom (v. 21). The narrative is insistent that at the time of his departure Abner is well. The point cannot be overstated. Abner left the meeting unhurt and unhindered.

II Samuel 3:22–30

Everything is settled between David, Abner, and Israel. A fourth actor, however, now enters the drama. It is Joab, son of Zeruiah (cf. 2:18). Joab is tough and hard, utterly loyal to David. Joab, however, is also jealous of his own role as chief of David's military men. Joab is back from a raid for spoil, apparently continuing David's earlier practice (v. 22; cf. I Sam. 27:8–12). He is not much inclined to plan, bargain, or negotiate. He is a man of the sword, who believes a little well-aimed killing will go further in state policy than a lot of words.

The last insistent word of verse 21, *šalom*, echoes in this new paragraph. Abner had gone “in peace” (v. 22). Then at Joab's return, Joab was told that Abner had “gone in peace” (v. 23). The RSV renders the verb in the passive, “It was told,” as in 6:12. The Hebrew verb is an active verb, “they told,” but there is no identifiable antecedent. Thus the passive is an appropriate rendering. The narrator is cunning in his use of a verb without an antecedent. What operated, according to the narrative, was court gossip. No one can be identified who informed Joab. No one can be held accountable. No one but Joab was identified. The lack of other subjects in the grammar isolates Joab even more as the one who is singularly held responsible for this dread act of murder that is to follow.

Joab, however, does not want peace. He does not want Abner to be at peace. He wants his own triumph and the elimination of Abner as his rival. Joab wants the leader of the north destroyed, not welcomed as a partner. He wants Abner eliminated, not welcomed into the Hebron government. Joab believes his own interest and that of David converge. In Joab's view, David does not need Abner as one to whom David is excessively beholden. Joab rebukes David, talking to him not as a king but as a fighting companion (v. 24). Joab is nervous when he sees his leader become “soft” and prepared to negotiate. Joab is sure Abner has set David up to betray him (v. 25). Joab's protest is credible, if viewed through hawkish eyes. He fears Abner has gained too much and David has conceded too much.

Remarkably, David does not answer; perhaps he lacks the personal authority to argue with Joab. David will not side with Joab, nor will he choose between Joab and Abner. Joab nonetheless is convinced of his own perception of Abner, and of his own jeopardy, and moves promptly to enact his own wisdom. He does not speak, but in two quick verses the deed is done (vv. 26–27). Abner is eliminated. According to Joab's own assessment, Joab has saved David from the threat of Abner. David does not

yet know about the death (v. 26). The narrator does not want David to know, nor does Joab. Such dark acts need to be done in ways that do not implicate the leader. David's "deniability" is established for the public record. David had left Abner in shalom. Now Abner is dead, but not by David's hand.

David's first response to the killing is to assert his own innocence: "I and my kingdom are for ever guiltless" (v. 28). David and the narrator have concluded that the only serious threat to David's kingdom is bloodguilt. David will not be defeated by external enemies, for he can manage such enemies. His danger is from bloodguilt, which is not so manageable. It is possible for blood to cry out in vengeance until it is satisfied (cf. Gen. 4:10). David wants no part in such guilt. He has scrupulously, but not easily, avoided bloodguilt with Saul (I Sam. 24:12), with Nabal (I Sam. 25:33), and again with Saul (I Sam. 26:18).

David will not now have his reputation and his innocence betrayed by this ambitious, impetuous Joab. David knows unrequited blood has enduring, dangerous power. He therefore puts an eternal curse on Joab, Joab's house, and Joab's brothers (v. 29). They must pay, and David is innocent. The narrator is at great pains in this matter, because he knows that bloodguilt has now come to dwell very close to the person of David. The arrangement of the narrative indicates what is foremost in the intent of the narrator.

Verses 28–29 provide an extended vindication of David, which is the real point of the narrative. Only then, by way of factual conclusion, does the narrative tersely report about the actual murder (v. 30). In that report Joab is now joined in guilt by his brother Abishai. The record is now clear; the fault is with the sons of Zeruiah. The murder of Abner is the working out of a feud with that family and the entire family is implicated. The bloody preoccupation of the sons of Zeruiah, however, has nothing to do with David and his kingdom (cf. v. 39).

II Samuel 3:31–39

After the initial statement of innocence (v. 28) and the corresponding curse on Joab (vv. 29–30), David's public response to Abner's death is a state funeral in order to salvage what he can. The funeral is important. David needs to establish his innocence and to reassure the elders of the

north who (like Abner) deal with David that they are not automatically placed in jeopardy. Much depends on David's communication of this reassurance. We need not doubt David's genuine respect for Abner, but the funeral is also a media event. It is like a U.S. president with the returned body of a soldier from an unauthorized war. The president must lead national mourning, which is genuine, but at the same time must stage a media event designed to legitimate policy.

David proclaims a season of mourning and summons the entire government to join the grief—even Joab. “David followed the bier” dressed for grief (v. 31). We may imagine that in the procession Joab came soon after David. Joab was forced to walk there. David is in charge and Joab is humiliated. David honors Abner and rebukes Joab. In this dual action David is at his most magisterial. The narrator seems to grasp the dramatic power of this moment, for he refers to David as “King David” (v. 31). While David had previously been identified as “king” (2:4, 7, 11; 3:17, 21–24), this is the first formal use linking personal name and royal office. It is when the threat of the north has been decisively eliminated in the death of Abner that the throne is secure enough to warrant this powerful phrase. No one doubts David's governance in this moment of grief, honor, and rebuke.

Joab thought his killing of Abner was to serve the crown; yet now he is being shamed to submit to the honoring of Abner. The state has its needs! Beyond the fears and ambitions of Joab, which are quite personal, David has larger reasons of state, which require the public grief. Reasons of state override the personal preoccupations of Joab.

David's lament over Abner (v. 33) is not as passionate as that over Saul and Jonathan (1:1–27). It is nonetheless a handsome tribute. Abner in his dying was treated as a loser (“fool,” v. 33; McCarter reads “outcast”). He should have died in dignity, but he dies a shameful death—a common murder by thugs who beat up persons at the police station. David's poetic words are matched by his decree to fast in mourning (v. 35).

David does three things concerning Abner's death: He rebukes Joab (vv. 28–29), honors Abner (vv. 31–34), and engages in ostentatious mourning (v. 35). David's actions do not go unnoticed. The people notice that David is still the passionate, caring man they have known him to be (v. 36). They notice David has not turned into a cynical despot, incapable of caring. They notice he has not completely capitulated to Joab, whom they perhaps fear and resent. They notice that there continues to be a human quality about

David's governance that permits them to believe David is the vehicle of Yahweh's will.

Most important, the people of the north ("all Israel") are able to believe David has not willed or ordered the death of Abner (v. 37). Because of that conclusion, the negotiations of David and the north can proceed.

The conclusion of the episode is a masterful one, exhibiting the mastery of the narrator (vv. 31–39). Perhaps behind the artistry of the narrator lives the shrewd genius of David. For our purposes it is enough to discern the delicate, sensitive portrayal of David made by the narrator. Verses 38 and 39 are marvelously set in tension with each other. In verse 38 David speaks of Abner, perhaps for public consumption but also because greatness recognizes greatness. Abner is a prince and a great man. Abner is a true leader, not merely brave, fierce, and loyal but with the power to shape the destiny of a people. The power of David's speech in verses 33 and 38–39 is characteristic of a great political or military leader who is able to transcend competition or resistance and to acknowledge greatness, even if it happens not to be part of one's own party.

David's words about Abner are made more poignant by verse 39. Abner is great, he is so unlike Joab. It is odd that David's ungrudging tribute to Abner evokes a comment on the sons of Zeruiah. The sons of Zeruiah are also brave, fierce, and loyal, but no one will ever mistake Joab for a leader and no one will call him great or noble. Joab is well cast as a second man; he will always be only that but, as a second man, indispensable to David.

In verses 38–39, David mediates the legacy of Joab and Abner. Joab may indeed have eliminated a serious rival candidate for power, but the real outcome of his deed was to plant bloodguilt in the regime. David is innocent, but this regime will never be innocent again.

In this long episode (vv. 6–39), we have a working of *Realpolitik*. The action is perfectly credible. The characters say and do what real people might say and do. There is an almost complete absence of religious tendency. It is remarkable that only Abner speaks of a religious dimension. Abner says to Ishbosheth, "If I do not accomplish what Yahweh has sworn to David" (v. 9), and Abner says to the elders, "The LORD has promised David" (v. 18).

Abner knows that in the midst of bargains, killings, and funerals, in the midst of seizing concubines (Abner) and guarding preeminence (Joab), there is another power and purpose at work. The promise of Yahweh functions,

hidden, in the midst of human action. David's "new age" wells up in the midst of conventional people, who may ignore the promise but who wind up serving that promise. The narrator let us see the operation of Yahweh's determined promise through these unwitting characters, their devious words, and their self-serving actions. Through the sordid narrative, the kingdom has advanced a step toward Jerusalem.

II Samuel 4:1–12

As we have observed in the opening stories of II Samuel, in order for David to secure power in the north, some carefully placed killings must occur—Saul and Jonathan, Abner, and now, in this chapter, Ishbosheth. It is hard to imagine how David could have prevailed in the north without these deaths.

The narrative of II Samuel is shrewd enough to discern that violence begets violence, that each killing implies a counter killing. With Saul and Jonathan, it is the Amalekite messenger who had to die (1:15–16). With Abner, it is Asahel, one of the sons of Zeruah, who must die (2:23). In this chapter with Ishbosheth, it is the two ruthless, well-meaning sons of Rimmon, Rechab and Baanah, who pay (vv. 11–12).

The deaths of Saul, Abner, and Ishbosheth require the counter deaths of the Amalekite, Asahel, and the sons of Rimmon. Their deaths are necessary to the narrative management of bloodguilt and to the establishment of David's innocence. Perhaps beyond those requirements, the narrator wants to assert that David's rise to power is marked by a deathliness that is costly for all parties, including David. David is indeed innocent, as the narrative claims, but he and his regime surely are not immune to the pervasiveness of death that is all around.

Though there are killings, and indeed must be killings in the early days of David's reign, David is innocent. David caused none of these deaths. David does not appreciate them or celebrate them. Saul's death is avenged by David (1:16). The most important point in the narrative concerning the Asahel and Abner killings is that David is innocent and is perceived to be innocent (3:28, 37). In the third case, the killing of Ishbosheth in our present chapter, David is again unimplicated: "Shall I not now require his blood at

your hand, and destroy you from the earth?” (v. 11). David did not instigate or implement the death of Ishbosheth.

Thus the three killings and three counter killings provide a convincing narrative strategy to assert the innocence of David:

<i>The Death</i>	<i>The Agent</i>	<i>David's Response</i>
Saul and Jonathan	the Amalekite	Lamentation (1:17)
Abner	Joab	Grief and fasting (3:31–35)
Ishbosheth	Rechab and Baanah	Vengeance (4:11–12)

4:1–3. These verses move us quickly into the drama. The economy of words in verse 1 does not fail to tell a subtle tale about Saul’s son. We know only two things about Ishbosheth. First, he was completely Abner’s creature (2:8–10). Indeed, Abner made him king and without Abner his fragile claim to power means nothing. Second, he greatly feared Abner and would not stand up to him (3:10). He could not tolerate Abner, but without Abner he ceased to exist. No Abner, no Ishbosheth as a serious public person. No wonder when Abner died Ishbosheth’s “hand relaxed” (RSV: “courage failed”). He lost his grip on power (v. 1).

It is noteworthy that the death of Abner “dismayed all Israel.” Is the dismay because Israel knew that the northern possibility had evaporated and they were at the harsh mercy of David? Or is it because they had been prepared to enter David’s loyalty and their point of access was now lost because of Abner’s death? Most likely the narrative mentions Israel’s dismay in order to assert the public character of Abner’s death. Clearly the northern enterprise has nearly collapsed. Events move inexorably to David, while David waits in innocence.

The main characters of the episode are introduced in verses 2–3. They are captains in Saul’s company and therefore of the company of Ishbosheth. We await their action.

4:4. This is an exceedingly curious note inserted in the middle of the Ishbosheth narrative. It disrupts the story line but does pertain to Ishbosheth’s fate. Ishbosheth is destined for death, whereas his nephew Mephibosheth is headed for mercy. In terms of the total David plot, this verse stands midway between I Samuel 20:14–17 and II Samuel 9:1–8. The subject of these two passages is the kindness (*hesed*) of David toward

Jonathan. In the former, David promised Jonathan that he would not cut off his “loyalty” to the house and name of Jonathan. In the latter, David now keeps that promise by asking if there is anyone left of the house of Saul to whom the king may show kindness. David promises *hesed* and fulfills that promise. Mephibosheth is the channel for the fulfillment of the promise. Thus this verse sets the stage for the affirmation that David is a man of *hesed* who keeps vows, honors friends, and shows mercy to those with whom he is bound.

The name of Mephibosheth is intended to remind the listener of David’s *hesed*. This peculiar verse, then, is a device for asserting that David would not do damage to Ishbosheth, who also comes under the vow made to Jonathan in I Samuel 20:14–17. Verse 4 reminds us of *hesed* in a chapter otherwise devoid of any dimension of mercy, fidelity, or generosity.

4:5–12. Verse 4 is a momentary pause. In verse 5 we return to the main plot. Ishbosheth is dismayed and vulnerable; he lacks the kind of authority that would preclude personal assault upon him. The sons of Rimmon are “princes of raiders” (v. 2). They belong to a band of paramilitary thugs who do the dirty work of state power. Here they work on their own initiative for their own interest. The royal son of Saul is at rest. The guard is asleep. When the captors get into the bedroom of this facade of royal power, they do their violence with lust and abandonment. The narrative uses three verbs to characterize their action (v. 7). They strike, they kill, they decapitate (cf. I Sam. 17:46). Ishbosheth, pitiful creature bereft of Abner, is three times dead. His head is a trophy. The head gives proof of the end of the Saulide threat, evidence of devotion to David by the sons of Rimmon, ground for a favor from David. The sons of Rimmon come to Hebron. They enter David’s presence, proud, defiant, expecting commendation. They give their bloody act a theological reading: “It is Yahweh who has avenged!” (v. 8).

These brothers have misread everything, of course. They have misunderstood Yahweh, and David, and vengeance. What they thought would bring joy to David brings dismay instead (v. 10). What they had hoped would bring their advancement does in fact cause their termination. In anticipating David’s response (which by now we can predict), these ambitious killers gravely misread David. Because of their misreading, these two raiders have to die. Theirs is a didactic death, whereby David asserts

that assaults on Saul's heritage will not be tolerated. Again, it takes three verbs to report their death: killed, cut off, hanged. They are exhibited for all to see. Their hanging bodies show how death begets death and how loyal is David as the sworn friend of Saul, Jonathan, Mephibosheth, and even Ishbosheth.

In the end, the avenged Ishbosheth is buried with Abner (v. 12). We are not told of an elaborate funeral, as with Abner. It is ironic that Ishbosheth lies buried and honored beside Abner, whose creator he was in life, whose companion he now is in death. Hebron becomes a burying ground for David's opponents, who may have been threats in life but are honored in death.

There is a killing. There probably was no other way to conclude the Saulide threat. Again, David is innocent. The narrative invites a reflection on power politics and the brutality of power. The narrative invites sensitivity to the odd way in which loyalty can well up in the midst of blood and vengeance, while we wait to see if *hesed* can have any lasting voice against such destructive power. Perhaps this story (along with ch. 1) invites a class analysis of the violence in which states are based. Why is it that the lower agents, the Amalekite or the sons of Rimmon, always are indicted and executed, while the legitimate one who benefits from the acts ends up vindicated, acquitted, and solidified in power? How would the legitimate ones survive in office if they did not have the ruthless loyal ones to kill for their preservation and die for their honor? What a sordid, sorry mess such a transfer of power is, out of which comes this uncontaminated David!

David knows, beyond a hint of public doubt, that it is Yahweh, only Yahweh, who redeems his life (v. 9). That strange, welcome redemption, however, takes place in and through the ambitious, miscalculating, bloody deeds of less discerning, less cunning people. These less discerning, less cunning ones must die in the service of David's overriding destiny. David's destiny advances precisely through their misdeeds. They pay—and David moves a great step toward fulfillment and power. The narrative constructs a powerful interface between such cunning destructiveness by lesser characters and David's firm resolve to do *hesed*. Their destructiveness does not nullify David's resolve.

II Samuel 5:1–10

David Established as the Successor

Verses 1–10 are reckoned by most scholars as the conclusion of the long narrative of the rise of David, which began in I Samuel 16. At the beginning of that narrative, David appeared as an eighth son, a genuine nobody to whom power was given. In this pericope, at the end of the narrative, the sacramental enactment of power in I Samuel 16:1–13 now comes to political embodiment. David is fully established in power and prestige. Yahweh's promises have been kept, David's enemies have been overcome.

5:1–5. David has already been anointed king in the south, affirmed by the “men of Judah” (2:1–4). The Judean act gave no claim of legitimacy in the north, however. The carefully wrought narrative of chapters 2—4 concerns the moves required to gain the north for David. Saul, Jonathan, Abner, and Ishbosheth are all eliminated. They have all been struck down, yet none has been struck by David. The northern leaders need a leader and have no visible candidate, other than David.

The tribes of Israel, the old Saul party, come to David at Hebron. Abner had promised that “all Israel” would come to David (3:21), but Abner died too soon. Without Abner the northerners do not come with strong bargaining power. They come almost as suppliants, making no condition as Abner might have done, almost begging David to take their crown. They make two arguments, when they come, to persuade David to take their throne. First, David and the northern elders belong to each other in covenantal solidarity (v. 1). The formula of “flesh and bone” is probably not a statement about biological kinship, but it recognizes that the two parties have long stood together in strength (bone) and in weakness (flesh). The elders propose to give formal certification of that long-standing relation.

Second, even while Saul was king, it was “you” (v. 2). The Hebrew is emphatic. “You, it was you,” who in fact did the things a king is supposed to do. It was you, David, who led out and led in (cf. I Sam. 8:20). It was David who was the real leader of the armies of Israel. While the narrative of I Samuel has emphasized the tension between Saul and David, it is also the

case that David was Saul's most formidable, feared, and effective soldier (cf. I Sam. 18:13). Even the Philistines knew David was Saul's best man (I Sam. 29:3–5).

On the basis of these two arguments (which effectively dismiss the claims of Saul), the tribes of Israel make their plea: "You shall be shepherd ... you shall be prince over Israel." The statement legitimating David in the mouth of "all Israel" is an alleged quote from Yahweh: that is, the north does not make its own appeal to David but claims to be enacting the intention of Yahweh. The statement the northerners quote does not in fact appear earlier in the narrative; there is, however, no doubt the statement alludes to the initial anointing in I Samuel 16:1–13, which utilizes the metaphor of shepherd. The important point is that David's kingship is presented and understood not as a human political decision but as a decree of Yahweh.

The term "shepherd" is a conventional metaphor in the ancient world for king, indicating the responsibility of the king to guard, feed, nurture, and protect the flock: that is, the community over which he presides. With the use of this metaphor, we are now able to see how the entire narrative of David's rise is staged from shepherd boy (I Sam. 16:11) to shepherd king. The ascension narrative begins with the initial announcement that David is "keeping the sheep" (I Sam. 16:11). This role is reinforced by the self-description of David, "Your servant used to keep sheep" (I Sam. 17:34–36). By a return to the metaphor of shepherd and sheep at the end of this long narrative, we are able to see how the initial act in I Samuel 16:1–13 with this shepherd boy has had its focus from the outset on the outcome of II Samuel 5:2. It is Yahweh's overriding intention in the narrative that the shepherd boy should become the shepherd of Israel.

The use of the shepherd-sheep metaphor for David suggests a variety of other uses of the metaphor that may be related to our exposition. Reference should be made to Psalm 23 and the extensive use of the figure in Ezekiel 34. The primary requirement of a "good shepherd" is to remember that the shepherd exists for the sake of the sheep and their well-being. A bad shepherd, by contrast, is one who acts as though the sheep exist for the well-being, enhancement, and profit of the shepherd. The use of the metaphor applied to David thus provides a critical criterion for David, who on occasion gives himself for his flock and on occasion uses the flock for his own ends. It is not accidental that Nathan's parable utilizes the

shepherd-sheep metaphor to indict David (12:1–4). In the episode of Bathsheba and Uriah, David misuses his role as shepherd and at enormous cost works only to enhance his own situation. In this initial invitation from “all Israel” to David, the elders have in mind that David should use his enormous gifts and great power for the sake of the community. His performance in the subsequent account is a mixed one.

The metaphor of shepherd and sheep introduces an entire theory of governance and power. That theory receives its most remarkable embodiment in the vocation of Jesus, who is the good shepherd whose death is interpreted as a complete sacrifice of the shepherd for the sheep: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Thus the metaphor is pushed to its interpretive limit, a limit obviously not approached by David.

In their appeal to David the elders use a second phrase, again allegedly quoting Yahweh: “You shall be prince over Israel” (v. 2). The precise meaning of the term “prince” (*nagid*) is much disputed. At the least, it is a word used to avoid the title “king” (*melek*). To be sure, the narrative commentary of verse 3 uses the term “king,” but the actual wording of the elders seems to want to avoid that high title. Two reasons for such an avoidance are likely. First, to call David “prince” leaves room for the kingship of Yahweh. This *nagid* is one way out of the vexed notion that human kingship is a rejection of the kingship of Yahweh.

Second, the elders apparently do not wish to overlegitimate or excessively exalt David in office. One may imagine that in this carefully phrased formulation the elders of Israel are acutely aware of the dangers of creating a “royal monster,” who overrides traditional notions of covenant and operates as Samuel had warned (I Sam. 8:11–19). The elders have no intention of giving David too much room in which to operate.

This restrained authorization on the part of the northern elders is underscored by the covenant-making in verse 3. We are given no particulars, but the very notion of covenant (interpreted by 5:2) suggests a theory of political power that is conditional, limited, and negotiated. As noted long ago by Alt, the terms of kingship given by the north seem to be very different from those of Judah, in which there is no mention of covenant (cf. 2:1–4). This important difference is seen again in the negotiations and schism of I Kings 12 concerning David’s grandson Rehoboam. David himself is such a powerful and dominant figure that the differences between

north and south are not crucial as long as his personality dominates. It is clear in any case that David has no blank check from the northern elders but must operate in a framework of mutuality.

On this covenantal basis, David is “anointed” king (v. 3). The act of anointing is a very different authorization from the act of Abner in 2:9, wherein he “made Ishbosheth king.” Abner’s act was a bold, unilateral political act; this anointing is in the framework of careful and binding agreements.

Verses 4b–5 suggest a chronological figure of forty years for David’s entire reign, which is taken by scholars to be roughly correct. David enjoyed a long season of stability, security, and, on the whole, success. While the taking of Jerusalem has not yet been narrated, the proleptic reference to Jerusalem in verse 5 shows that the narrator already knows the end of the story. Finally, David’s “home” is not Hebron with the “men of Judah.” Nor does David settle in the north with “the elders.” David is something quite new. He must have a new place all his own, unencumbered by Israel’s old memories. That new home is Jerusalem, given him by Yahweh as a private domain. It will be David’s city. He will be unencumbered, unindebted, autonomous when he arrives there.

5:6–8. These verses are among the most difficult in the books of Samuel. The main point of the text is clear enough. David captures the ancient city of Jerusalem, which has been in the hands of the Canaanites. He captures it with “his men” (v. 6): that is, his band of loyal mercenaries who owe nothing to Israel or to Judah but only to David. The captured city is now the “city of David” (v. 9). It is David’s personal property and the seat of his unfettered autonomy. Jerusalem never was regarded as a city of Judah or a city of Israel, only as “the city of David.” Moreover, the city is well defended and happily located between Israel and Judah. This is a proper ending for the story of the rise, for now David is fully settled in his own safe place.

The details of the conquest of Jerusalem, however, are exceedingly obscure. First, the meaning of the term in verse 8 (which the RSV renders “water shaft”) is obscure. The “water shaft” reading follows a well-established tradition suggesting either that David’s men invaded the city through the water tunnel, which was the city’s only vulnerable point, or that they controlled the water supply and thus forced surrender. Second, the

references to the “blind and lame” (vv. 6, 8) are problematic. The reference to blind and lame in verse 6 may suggest that Jerusalem is so easily defended that even the disabled can guard it. On that basis the end of verse 6 is a taunt against David. In verse 8a it is said David hates the blind and lame, perhaps because they taunted David. Finally, in verse 8b, these statements result in a programmatic expulsion of the blind and lame from the city, and perhaps later from the temple. In fact, however, the conclusion drawn in verse 8 seems to have no necessary connection with the statement in verse 6. The three references to the blind and the lame (vv. 6, 8) are strung together without a visible connection.

5:9–10. These verses provide a summary statement that draws to a successful ending the long tale beginning in I Samuel 16:1. David is now securely settled in his own city. Verse 9 speaks of the concrete geography of David’s new seat of power. Verse 10 is a theological verdict to be deduced from the settlement of verse 9. Here the narrative explicitly affirms what has been clear all along: This rise is God’s doing. David—in contrast to Saul and all of Saul’s people—is greater and greater, because Yahweh has been with him every step of the way. In the end, the narrator asserts, it is God’s guiding providence that works its decisive will in Israel. David is the primary vehicle and benefactor of that providential will. The narrative ends so that we should be amazed at this eighth son, the Bethlehemite nobody who is now secure in power.

The narrative invites our reflection on a deep and stunning tension. On the one hand, if we stay inside the Samuel narrative, we have come to an ending. Now David is secure. In important ways the delight, nerve, and appeal of David are culminated here. David has gone as far as he could go in his trust in Yahweh. Now, it appears, he has come to so much power that his life henceforth is no longer a simple tale of trust. In the next telling of David’s story, which begins on the threshold of Jerusalem, the simple story of trust and faithfulness becomes more complex and ambiguous. The power of faithfulness and trust endures, but the story now includes much more ruthless military consolidation and self-preoccupation. The David who was content to receive gifts now becomes a David who grasps at power. As we reach the end of the story of David’s rise, we seem also to reach the end of David’s unambiguous trust and faithfulness. We might reflect on why it is that power, security, well-being, and legitimacy seem to transform David’s

way of life and power. David from now on is no longer a subject of stories of trusting playfulness.

On the other hand, in the larger scope of biblical faith, the establishment of David in Jerusalem is not an ending but a beginning of Israel's fresh imaginative life. The twin establishments of David and Zion generate in Israel new imaginative possibilities for the future. The wonder of the Jerusalem establishment permits Israel to have new theological conviction about what God will do in time to come.

Because of such imaginative possibility, Israel can dream, hope, and yearn for a new Jerusalem in which all the old hatreds and alienations are overcome and the rule of God makes a new life possible (cf. Isa. 65:17–25). In much of the church, this odd text from II Samuel 5 is included in the lectionary as a foil for the new Jerusalem evoked by the gospel. In the old Jerusalem of this text, the blind and lame are excluded and despised. In the new Jerusalem envisioned by the gospel, all are welcomed, and the blind and lame are transformed into full, welcome participants. Clearly the hope of a new Jerusalem explodes beyond the historical realities of David. Even the Jerusalem of David, however, will not be fully understood in Israel unless it is recognized that Jerusalem is a theological focus that generates new historical possibilities and expectations. Thus the very city that in 5:6–8 is organized to exclude becomes a symbol of inclusiveness, a house of prayer for all peoples (Isa. 56:7).

In recent theological discussion, Gese and Stuhlmacher have most fully grasped the extraordinarily expansive potential of Zion. They have seen that the force of Israel's memory has been transferred from Sinai to Zion, from Moses to David. They dare to speak of "Zion-torah," which supersedes the Sinai torah. This transformation of tradition is not explicated in our text. Nonetheless our interpretation must at least struggle with this initial exclusion of the disabled, which in Israel's subsequent theological reflection is transformed into a joyous inclusiveness. David, the provoked warrior, might exclude. David, the embodiment of Israel's best hope, will eventually include. Later Israel struggles to see if its "city of God" will eventually exclude or include. The disabled wait to see.

PART FOUR

The Reign of David

II SAMUEL 5:11 – 8:18

For I am a man under authority,
with soldiers under me; and I say to one,
“Go,” and he goes, and to another, “Come,”
and he comes,
and to my slave,
“Do this,” and he does it.

Matthew 8:9

Israel has been waiting for the kingdom since I Samuel 8. David’s kingdom represented for Israel a reliable economic order, a secure military position, and a political legitimacy among the nations. In Israel’s theological tradition, the kingdom also came to embody the approval and will of God. Whereas the ultimate kingdom hoped for by Christians is that the kingdoms of this age will become “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:15), in ancient Israel the process is reversed. It is hoped that the kingdom of God will become the kingdom of this age and of his messiah (David). It is the passionate desire of Israel that Yahweh’s powerful rule should take real, effective, concrete form, so real and powerful that the nations will notice and take it into account. These chapters are the story of consolidation whereby God’s rule becomes the hard-nosed visible rule of David. Gifts have been given to Israel through David. Now those gifts must be organized, consolidated, and legitimated.

In our treatment of these chapters we may distinguish between two kinds of factors. First, behind the literary text there is the historical reality of the establishment of David's monarchy in Jerusalem. Along with military success, David needed to establish religious, social, and political legitimacy. To be able to do that he had to claim and manage old religious symbols (e.g., do that he had to claim and manage old religious symbols (e.g., the ark). It is plausible that David was surrounded and served by skillful and shrewd public relations people who advanced the royal interest. We may refer to these agents of the king as his ideologues, who shaped and presented reality to enhance David's claims. The ideologues articulate a partisan religious claim for David. Out of that propaganda, the text makes a derivative, reflective statement.

Second, our literature from 5:11 through chapter 8 represents an artistic presentation of and reflection upon this royal ideology. The literature intends to serve the royal cause. It is, however, an artistic reflection that is at least one step removed from the historical facts and from blatant ideology. The shapers of the text were as zealous for David as were the political ideologues, but they have a different function to play. It is their work to create a literature that serves the political claims of legitimacy. I shall refer to the shapers of this literature as David's apologists. Thus I make a distinction between political ideologues and literary apologists. Both serve the same cause, but in different ways. In our handling of the text, we are concerned directly with the literary work of the apologists. Behind their work, we surmise, was the intentional and adroit work of the political ideologues, who dealt more directly with the political realities of the Davidic establishment.

Scholars generally see the David narrative in two primary units, the Rise of David (I Sam. 16:1—II Sam. 5:10) and the Succession Narrative (II Sam. 9:1—20:26; I Kings 1:1—2:46). Our current section, 5:11—8:18, thus falls between two larger units. Whereas the first presents David in his ascendancy, the second presents David in his demise and expresses pathos and ambiguity. Our chapters thus come after the raw vitality of the rise of David and before the terrible pathos of the succession narrative. They show the painful process whereby this beloved chieftain is transformed into a hardened monarch, who now has more power than popular affection. Indeed, this narrative lacks the energy that comes from affection and the passionate presence of God, which attends the affection of the people. With

the loss of human affection and divine passion there is also a loss of narrative imagination. These chapters invite us to ask about the transformation of David and the derivative transformation of Israel, about the power of legitimation and the legitimation of power, about the costs that come with such settled legitimacy and such unquestioned royal power. Do we witness here the disappearance of the David for whom we have waited, and to whom we are so much drawn? Does power in the historical process cause the disappearance of everything precious? Do those beset by such disappearance even notice what is happening?

It may be that these chapters are simply a collection of important narratives placed back to back in the canon. Flanagan, however, has suggested an organizational pattern which in my judgment is persuasive. Flanagan observes six primary narrative elements that are arranged chiastically in three pairs so as to trace the costly transformation from tribe to state:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. List of family (5:13–16) | 3' Oracle as new claim (7:1–29) |
| 2. Battle of Philistines (5:17–25) | 2' Battle with two nations (8:1–14) |
| 3. Ark as old (6:1–20) | 1' List of officials (8:15–18) |

The two lists (5:13–16; 8:15–18) form the outside boundaries of the unit, and the stories of ark (6:1–20) and oracle (7:1–29) form the central focus. Moreover, in each pair the second element is contrasted with the first. Thus the list of officers displaces the list of children as the monarchy moves from kinship toward bureaucracy. The battle with the Philistines is replaced by more expansive battles, as David no longer struggles for survival but now is involved in territorial expansion. At the center, the old, precious ark is superseded by Nathan's oracle, which bespeaks a radical innovation in Israel, breaking David free of old tribal loyalties carried with the ark.

Flanagan's analysis suggests that these in-between chapters are an intentionally ordered unit. The structure and flow of the text invites us to ask about the costs and gains of the moves from kinship to bureaucracy, from battles of survival to state conquests, from old symbols to new theological claims. These moves were essential as a base for royal power. The costs, as we shall see, are considerable. As we watch the change in the character of Israel, we may yearn with considerable wistfulness for more innocent times.

II Samuel 5:11–25

Serving the Royal Cause

5:11–12. Israel had wanted to be “like the nations” (I Sam. 8:5, 20). With a king, Israel has achieved that status. It is therefore appropriate now to have other nations present in the story. Even given this expectation, Hiram’s appearance is abrupt. His appearance marks a staggering new beginning. David is no longer with his raiding bands who adore him. Now David receives ambassadors. Perhaps David has changed from his rough military garb to urbane “state dress.” One cannot imagine this David inquiring of Yahweh, “Shall we go up?” The old primitive faith questions now are not only embarrassing but unnecessary. Hiram embodies what is most successful in the world, commercialism. He also represents what is most dangerous to Israel, cedars and self-sufficiency. David has joined the nations. David is a practitioner of alliances and accommodations. Isaiah later warns about such alliances (Isa. 2:6–8). Jeremiah later sees that cedar and its accompanying opulence will talk Judean kings out of justice (Jer. 22:13–18). Verse 11 sounds like a historical report, but it is in fact an ominous act of warning.

Of course David cannot see the danger in such an alliance. He only sees what is obvious, that Yahweh has made him king (v. 12). David still has faith. He knows his success is the Lord’s doing. He still has his priorities straight. His faith in Yahweh is placed in jeopardy, however, by his new reductive circumstance—more than he recognizes. The first fact of David’s new rule is Hiram. David is on his way to trade, affluence, and self-sufficiency!

5:13–16. David acts like a king. He has concubines. He already had many wives (3:2–4), but in Hebron the word “concubine” was not used. Now in the royal city there is a new vocabulary for a new practice. The new language and the new practice appear without apology. David is well into the process of sexual politics. It is odd and noteworthy that in the list of his children’s names in verses 14–16 the name of Solomon first appears. The

cast of characters for the upcoming royal story begins to develop: first Hiram, then Solomon. David's power is indeed expansive.

5:17–25. Once more the Philistines! David can do what Saul could not do. David puts an end to the Philistine threat. David is portrayed as the utterly faithful soldier who trusts the guidance of Yahweh. After dealing with Hiram (vv. 11–12) and taking concubines (v. 13), David's incident with the Philistines seems like a return to an older time. The narrative presents David in two battles with the Philistines. In the first (vv. 17–21), they seek him out. Perhaps they want to block David before he is too well established. David is utterly faithful, asking the old pre-king question of Yahweh (v. 19). Yahweh gives permission and David wins. The idols of the Philistines are taken in the battle, thus connecting David to the success of the ark narratives (I Sam. 4–6).

The second battle (vv. 22–25) ends in a second victory. Again the faithful question is asked (v. 23). This time a delayed strategy is employed (vv. 23–24), but the result is again victory. David has now fought his last battle with the traditional enemy. In this narrative, David is still presented in the old tribal categories of "holy war." The new modes of royal warmaking have not yet impinged upon the narrative. On the basis of Flanagan's analysis, we shall see how dramatically this narrative contrasts with its counterpart in 8:1–14.

II Samuel 6

David Remembers the Ark

How odd that David (and the narrator) should now suddenly remember the ark. The ark has been shelved for a long time, following its return from the Philistines (I Sam. 6:19—7:1). Indeed, Israel has not even thought of the ark since it was deposited in the house of Abinadab (I Sam. 7:1–2). After twenty years of dormancy, the ark is now recalled as a vehicle for royal legitimation. David and his ideologues are engaged in a daring move. They are introducing into Israel a radical and bold innovation in the form of dynasty and royal city. With the dynasty comes bureaucracy, harem, and mercenary army, all of which are necessary props for royal power. These innovations are sure to alienate the old conservatives, so important to the control of political opinion in Israel.

In a remarkably imaginative move, David appeals to Israel's most precious ancient symbol, the ark. The ark stands at the center of the old ideology of "holy war." It bespeaks the dangerous and crucial presence of Yahweh in Israel and Yahweh's solidarity with Israel. The ark embodies what is unifying among the tribes and clans of Israel. The ark articulates and embodies for old Israel the holy rule of Yahweh.

David's new regime in Jerusalem is a radical departure from that old order and as such is in urgent need of legitimation. A lesser figure would not have tried the strategy narrated in chapter 6. But David, destiny's man that he is, can try anything and succeed. He appeals to the central symbol of the old order to legitimate a new order that decisively departs from all that was traditional. While this move may have been an act of good faith, it is also a nervy act of calculation. By his appropriation of the ark, David has placed the old conservatives in a difficult bind. They have not forgotten the significance of the ark, which referred to the raw presence of Yahweh, the power of Yahweh, and the covenantal implications of Yahweh's sovereignty. Now, under David, in order to have access to the ark and to its old significance, even conservative Israelites with long memories and keen theological sensitivity must make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the new city with David's new power and new ideology. They have nowhere else to

go. To make contact with the ancient symbol, they must give tacit assent to the new royal apparatus.

Thus the elaborate ritual of chapter 6 is to bind together in a visible way the old ritual claims and the new ideological venture of monarchy. In light of the later Solomonic temple (cf. I Kings 8:1–12), we may conclude that David did his work well. Solomon could claim so much for the temple because David had so well established the legitimacy of Jerusalem. David's daring act of legitimation functions effectively. The outcome is that Jerusalem, recently acquired from the Canaanites, is now authorized as the seat of Israel's precious tradition, the locus of Yahweh's presence, and the place of appeal to Yahweh in time of need (cf. I Kings 8:31–54).

6:1–5. The removal of the ark to Jerusalem happens in two stages, interrupted by a grave crisis. The removal begins with a great pageant as the ark is taken from the house of Abinadab (cf. I Sam. 7:1–2). David's ideologues could well remember where the ark was. Its recovery and restoration to public life in Israel were done with enormous royal flourish (v. 5).

6:6–11. The transport of the ark from its obscure place of storage to its new place of prestige and significance is an enormously important event for David. The coming of the ark signified two things for the king. Looking back, it meant a reengagement with the taproot of Israel's religious vitality. David here gets back in touch with the most elemental dimensions of Israel's traditional faith; it is no wonder that the movement of the ark evoked such a stupendous celebration. Looking forward, the reclaiming of the ark is an opportunity for a powerful propagandistic effort to assert the new regime as the rightful successor to the old tribal arrangement. At the same time, the narrative looks back to tribal vitality and forward to royal legitimacy. This capacity to look both ways introduces into our interpretation of the narrative an unavoidable ambiguity. Insofar as the narrative looks back, the advent of the ark bespeaks genuine religious seriousness on David's part. Insofar as the event looks forward, there is a hint of political calculation and manipulation in David's act. Both factors are present. The wonder is that David is able to hold them together in a kind of personal authenticity that resists choosing one factor or the other.

The ark is enormously welcome in Israel. However, the ark must not be presumed upon, taken for granted, or treated with familiarity. The holiness of God is indeed present in the ark, but that holiness is not readily available. To touch the ark is to impinge on God's holiness, to draw too close and presume too much. Thus Uzzah suffers the same fate as the "men of Bethshemesh" in I Samuel 6:19. Uzzah's awesome death, like the earlier deaths, evokes an awestruck question on the lips of David: "How can the ark ... come to me?" (v. 9). The death has its salutary effect; David becomes freshly afraid of Yahweh (v. 9). When people are no longer awed, respectful, or fearful of God's holiness, the community is put at risk. David may intend to use the ark for his own purposes, for religious equipment has powerful legitimating effect. Such a political use, however, does not empty the old symbol of its formidable theological power. The ark is not merely a useful tool. Beyond its utilization, there is an awesome presence to which heed must be paid.

6:12–19. After a three-month delay, the procession of the ark is resumed. It is clear that the ark (and Yahweh) are well-intentioned toward Israel, so that it is safe to proceed. Indeed, the custodian of the ark is blessed by Yahweh (vv. 11–12). Again there is great pageantry and a show of royal affluence (vv. 12–13). The dancing and singing respond to the assurance that God is present, that Jerusalem is now a legitimate shrine, that God is now patron and has taken up residence in David's city. The mood and intent of the celebration is one of unfettered, unashamed extravagance.

Indeed, the event evokes extravagance, for the coming of the ark is Yahweh's self-giving to David and to Israel's new political beginning. The extravagance is one of liturgy. There are endless burnt offerings and peace offerings (vv. 17–18). The community is without restraint in its gratitude for the self-giving and the presence of God. There is a social extravagance closely tied to these offerings, which are communal meals. Everyone celebrates, each with "a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins" (v. 19). Everyone has cause to rejoice, because life has started again. In addition to liturgical and social extravagance, there is royal extravagance. David broke any sedate royal pose he might have assumed when he danced without restraint before the ark and in the presence of the people (v. 14). David embodies and legitimates the gratitude of his people. This is a day to be remembered in Israel!

There has been much speculation about David's dance. At the negative extreme, it is suggested that David participated in a Canaanite ecstatic dance that became something of an orgy, and that is why he is rebuked by Michal. At the positive extreme, the dance is taken as legitimate liturgic dance, the bodily expression as proper worship. The narrative invites such probes, but it gives us little clue about David's intention.

It is plausible that the dance of David expresses the ambiguity we have already articulated. David's dance, on the one hand expresses a genuine act of religious vitality, of genuine worship, making himself available for Yahweh's power, purpose, and presence. On the other hand, the extravagance of David, even personal, bodily extravagance, may be a political act to express profound solidarity with Yahweh in the new establishment. The foundation of the new regime and the founding of the new shrine around the ark (v. 17) most likely share in the ambiguity. It is, however, a hidden ambiguity. At face value, the day of transporting the ark is wondrous. Indeed, it is a perfect day for all parties—Yahweh, Israel, David, the priests—for all parties except Michal, Saul's daughter, David's wife. The demanding, relentless voice of the old house of Saul sounds in the midst of the celebration. It is a voice of despising (v. 16).

6:20–23. The abrasive note of verse 16 prepares us for this last scene. We move from a public display to a private domestic conversation, a conversation between husband and wife. David had won Michal from Saul (I Sam. 18:25–27). He had lost her (I Sam. 25:44) and then claimed her a second time (II Sam. 3:13–16). Michal is obviously important to David. As Saul's daughter she gives David legitimacy in the eyes of the old Saul party.

This is also a conversation between the voices of two conflicting factions. The narrator treats this conversation as a part of the public account of power that has important implications for the future of governance in Israel. Michal is not only David's wife but is also something of a competitor as a Saulide. We do not know why Michal despises David. Perhaps his behavior is too reminiscent of Saul's behavior when he also was out of control (I Sam. 10:9–13; 19:20–24). Perhaps Michal does not want a husband who is out of control in public.

The situation of being out of control, however, may be crucial to the function of the narrative. Flanagan suggests (p. 368) that this out of control

is the liminal point of transition between the restraints of the old tribal order and the possibilities of the new royal order:

[The scene was] a period of release from usual constraints and an occasion for creative response. It was here that the structures of the former state no longer held sway and the new state of Davidic dynasty had not yet been fully established. The dialogue between Michal and David made explicit that the issue was the legitimacy of his house as leader in Israel.

The exchange between Michal and David is carefully crafted. She speaks sarcastically about “the king” (v. 20). Perhaps she suggests that because she is the daughter of a king, she knows how a king should act, in contrast to David, who acts unworthily. Michal speaks with authority, with an assumed voice of strength. Her speech concerns “honor” (glory), “the maids,” and “uncovering shamelessly” (v. 20). Her words drip with sarcasm and anger. David’s response to her contains the same three elements, “contemptible,” “the maids,” “honor” (glory) (v. 22). Michal believes David has forfeited the respect he must have to be ruler. David refutes her judgment by saying he may be contemptible in her eyes, but in the eyes of the maidens (and therefore of political opinion) he is more honored.

In the center of the exchange (v. 21), David makes the claim that establishes his preeminence and dismisses Michal and the entire Saulide claim. That verse begins and ends with “before the LORD.” The words pile up to establish David’s claim of legitimacy: “Yahweh chose me ... above ... above ... to be prince over ... [over].” David’s “dishonor” consists in glad yielding to the gift of Yahweh. David is utterly Yahweh’s man, a fact Michal either cannot understand or refuses to acknowledge. The rhetoric of David’s response (vv. 22–23) evidences complete reliance on Yahweh and, at the same time, a disdainful dismissal of Michal and an end to any reliance on Saulide legitimacy. The rhetoric thus succeeds in driving an irreversible wedge between Yahweh (and David) and the Saulide patrimony now expressed by Michal. It is almost inevitable that in verse 23 the narrator finally, tersely, and without pity dismisses Michal. The future now lies with David, who has broken with this Saulide attachment.

The entire exchange moves toward the Yahwistic claim at the center:

Michal:	honor
	maids
	shamelessly
David:	<i>before Yahweh</i>

chose me above ... above
prince over
before Yahweh
contemptible
maids
honor

In the end, David is established by this confident rhetoric which refutes Michal. David uses Michal's words to dismiss her. Michal has no future, no claim on Israel, no prospect for life. In David's utter abandonment to dance and in his liturgic, social, royal extravagance, a new order is authorized, wrought out of unrestrained yielding and worship. David is freshly legitimate. The narrative of chapter 6 concerns a shift in power, a risk of worship that embraces Yahwism and permits new order. Popular use of this text to justify liturgic dance is quite beside the point, unless liturgic dance is seen as a means whereby power is reconfigured and new political legitimacy is received. The exchange with Michal reflects a total inversion. David, who is thought to be despised by Michal, is in fact honored in Israel and by Yahweh. Michal, who thinks she is in a position of strength, is dismissed by the narrative as barren and hopeless. There is something here of the exalted being humbled and the humbled being exalted (Matt. 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14). David is indeed the one who humbles himself and who, by the power of God, is exalted. The text remembers and enacts the strange singing of Hannah (I Sam. 2:7–8).

II Samuel 7

A Temple for Yahweh

This passage consists of a divine oracle (vv. 1–17) and a responding prayer (vv. 18–29). It occupies the dramatic and theological center of the entire Samuel corpus. Indeed, this is one of the most crucial texts in the Old Testament for evangelical faith. It is clear from chapters 5 and 6 that David is on the way to new forms of power and new claims of legitimacy. He has gotten himself a new city (5:6–10), and he has been able to claim the old ark as a legitimation of his new city (6:1–19). David's capacity to make use of the ark is surely marked by the ambiguity we have noted elsewhere and is at the same time a judicious use and a grateful yielding.

The impressiveness of David is in his capacity to make good use of such symbols without being excessively cynical. David is poised, in his faith with Yahweh, just at the balance point of glad yielding and manipulative utility. The central questions of royal legitimacy remain to be resolved, however. According to Flanagan's analysis, chapter 7 balances the ark story of chapter 6. chapter 6 concerns the utilization of an old symbol, whereas in chapter 7 we encounter the bold articulation of a new theological claim surpassing anything yet known in Israel. The problem for David is to legitimate a dynastic order that is no longer jeopardized by or responsive to every stir of the spirit. The old theological assumptions in Israel did not easily apply to David's new urban foundation. Thus a different expression of legitimacy was required.

The obvious answer to the problem of legitimacy characteristic of every ruler in the ancient world is to build a temple. Give God a permanent residence that will solidify the regime. In principle a temple lives in tension with the ark. Whereas the ark articulates God's freedom and mobility, the temple removes the danger and possibility that God might depart.

II Samuel 7:1–17

7:1–7. David proposes to build a temple. Temple building is undoubtedly a mixed act of genuine piety and self-serving legitimation. These verses reflect what must have been an honest dispute in Israel concerning the tension between God’s freedom and God’s presence. The temple guarantees God’s presence but at the same time militates against God’s freedom.

Nathan (who now appears for the first time) authorizes a temple (v. 3). Nathan senses no contradiction between Yahweh’s character and the requirements of the royal regime. The initial building permit is not the end of the question, however. In verse 3 Nathan’s permit is in his own voice. In verses 5–7 the voice is that of Yahweh, who speaks directly to Nathan and withdraws the permit. Yahweh argues that a permanent residence is unacceptable because it violates Yahweh’s freedom. Indeed, a permanent dwelling will prevent Yahweh from “coming and going.” This is a God who will not be held in place by any religious arrangement. “Cedar” is a commodity kings like and value (vv. 2, 7; cf. 5:11; Jer. 22:14–15). The plushness of the proposed temple contradicts Yahweh’s self-understanding. Yahweh will not be bought off, controlled, or domesticated by such luxury. Yahweh has been a free God and will continue to be. The royal apparatus is not able to make Yahweh its patron.

7:8–11. But what then? Is Yahweh not available to legitimate David? On the contrary, Yahweh is prepared to authorize and benefit David far beyond the state symbol of the temple. In order for David to understand Yahweh’s offer, Nathan reviews Yahweh’s long, gracious history with David. The review begins with the events of I Samuel 16:1–13, “I took you.” David is given no credit and assigned no merit in this recital. David’s preeminence and power are all Yahweh’s doing (cf. 5:12). David is the creation of Yahweh’s powerful, relentless graciousness. That is true of the past (vv. 8–9a); it will be true in the future (vv. 9b–11):

I will make for you a great name (v. 9)

I will appoint a place (v. 10)

I will give you rest (v. 11)

By the power of Yahweh, David will have great renown and a safe place.

This extraordinary promise culminates in verse 11: “I, Yahweh, will make you a house.” This oracle is built around a play on the word “house,”

which can mean either temple or dynasty. Roles are now reversed. David will not build Yahweh a house (temple), but Yahweh will build David a house (dynasty). The subject has been changed. The discussion is no longer about a temple, for Yahweh does not want or permit a temple. The oracle of Yahweh introduces the concept of a dynasty. Until now it has been only David's rule that needed legitimation. The oracle takes a great leap into the future and asserts for the foreseeable future a Davidic dynastic claim. The dynasty is not unrelated to the temple, but it is a very different social reality now brought into purview. Yahweh has done for David "far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20).

7:12–17. In these verses the oracle moves to its most extravagant claim. Verse 12 seems to allude to Solomon, who will have the kingdom and who will build a temple. In verse 13 the word "house" refers back to temple. This verse is regarded by many scholars as a later legitimation of Solomon and his temple, because this verse seems to envision the very "house" (temple) precluded in verses 5–7.

The main claim of the oracle is found in verses 14–16. First there is a reference to the son who is to come. This son may be punished, but he will never, never be rejected (vv. 14–15). David (and Solomon) are thus contrasted with Saul. Saul could lose Yahweh's *hesed*, but David, David's son, and David's line can never lose Yahweh's loyalty. Yahweh has made an unconditional promise. Verse 16 seems to move beyond Solomon to a dynastic principle that the Davidic house will be sure "for ever." The adverb "for ever" is used twice in verse 16. (Notice that this language has already been utilized by the narrator in the mouth of Abigail in I Sam. 25:28.) The shape of David's future is settled by the divine oracle. In 6:20–23, David's future was still "liminal," the future of the monarchy undetermined (cf. Flanagan). After the oracle of II Samuel 7, there is no longer need for the ark or any of the furniture of the old order. David's own anticipation that he will be "honored" (6:22) has come to fruition.

Chapter 7 is of peculiar interest because it indicates how the requirements and prospects of David change the subject of the theological conversation in Israel. The old discussion spoke with considerable anxiety about Yahweh's presence and how to secure it. The ark is a response to the question of presence. Now, however, the issue is not God's presence in the

community but solidarity with this man and this man's family. The sociohistorical character of Israel's faith is powerfully evident here.

1. One cannot avoid the impression that this is royal propaganda or ideology designed to enhance and legitimate the new state. Nathan is a prophet of God, but one schooled to package God's truth in ways useful to the regime. The oracle is an act of faith, perhaps tinged with ideology, which dares to claim God's peculiar solidarity with the Davidic establishment, a solidarity Yahweh has never before undertaken.

The affirmation of the oracle is a daring and serious act of theology. It is spoken by those who are deeply committed to David and who could discern in the life and achievement of David the powerful faithfulness of Yahweh. The rise of David could only be understood (on this reading) as the resolve and work of Yahweh, a resolve and work that would surely continue in the future.

The assessment of this powerful theological statement, however, is not easy or obvious. We cannot help but note that the oracle is not disinterested. It is a statement with partisan political commitments that establishes not only a theological idea but also a particular form of political power. Thus the high statement of theology lives very close to self-serving ideology and may be heard as an act of royal propaganda. Particular power arrangements that benefit some at the expense of others are now legitimated and guaranteed to perpetuity by the promise of God. It is almost impossible to sort out in this passage what is genuine faith and what is self-serving propaganda. It is important that our interpretation take seriously these twin dimensions of the statement. Recognition of this ambiguity may help us to discern as well that various theological claims in our own time are heavily laden with self-serving ideology.

2. This ideological utterance is the root of evangelical faith in the Bible: that is, faith that relies on the free promise of the gospel. Heretofore God's commitments to Israel are regularly and characteristically conditional. They are governed by the ominous "if" of ethical requirement. Indeed, the whole of Mosaic faith, sounded by Joshua and Samuel as well, is that God's good inclination depends on Israel's obedience. It is this "if" of requirement (cf. Ex. 19:5) that finally destroyed Saul, because he did not measure up (I Sam. 13:13).

With David, however, the "if" has disappeared. Now it is "but" (v. 15), a conjunction that might here be rendered "nevertheless." There are no acts of

disobedience in purview which can make Yahweh terminate this profound commitment. In this astonishing promise, Yahweh has signed a blank check to the David enterprise and has radically shifted the theological foundations of Israel. This is not to say there will not be sanctions and punishments, but they are not terminal. This is a powerful, clear articulation of “justification by grace” (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16–21) in which the “works” of David or Israel are not decisive. God loves unconditionally.

3. This ideological utterance is the taproot of the messianic idea in ancient Israel. The promise made to David is for time to come. It explicitly concerns David’s son Solomon, but there are always sons to come, generations of Davids yet unborn, each of which is the carrier of this unconditional gospel. By this announcement, the line of David is no longer simply a historical accident but is a constitutive factor in God’s shaping of the historical process. Out of this oracle there emerges the hope held by Israel in every season that there is a coming David who will right wrong and establish a good governance. That coming one may be hidden in the vagaries of history, may experience resistance from the recalcitrance of injustice and unrighteousness, but nevertheless there is one coming who will make things right.

It goes without saying that this text does not intend to point to Jesus. At the same time, however, we may see how easy and natural it was for the community around Jesus to seize upon this text as a way to understand the reality of Jesus. Aside from the specificity of Jesus, however, this enduring promise to David has placed messianism at the heart of both Judaism and Christianity. This utterance by Yahweh through the mouth of Nathan has made these communities to be communities of hope. That hope believes, confesses, and trusts that God will keep God’s promise of righting the world and that the promise will be kept within the historical process through a historical agent. This promise, then, is not one among many for Jews and Christians; it is the decisive shaper of both these communities who trust God’s work to become visible within the historical process.

4. There is no escape from the recognition that this ideological statement is the vehicle for the Bible’s best theology of grace and messianism. This oracle is not mere ideology, because it contains such a remarkable claim. It is also not pure theology, however, because it did and does serve the state so well. Thus evangelical faith comes in the form of royal ideology. Perhaps this is an extreme case of “word becoming flesh,”

of news becoming political grist. This combination of high faith and cunning ideology, I believe, is not to be sorted out. Indeed, biblical faith characteristically holds together high faith and political interest. We might wish we could have “pure faith” without such a dimension of vested interest. Because biblical faith and biblical texts live so close to historical reality and speak about such reality, however, we can have this faith only in this form.

The unavoidable combination of faith and interest suggests two awarenesses for our interpretation that need always to operate. This combination of faith and interest always keeps faith close to the realities of public life. The shapers of these texts spoke and believed as if God had to do directly with issues of power and justice, politics and economics. The text keeps our faith close to the decisive human realities. In addition, this same combination keeps biblical faith always open to ideological usurpation, so that this gospel of grace and of messiah is readily available for and vulnerable to all sorts of subsequent ideological use. A variety of evidences might be cited in our own time for the ways in which powerful, authoritative religious claims are politically useful in demonic ways. That is the inescapable character of biblical faith. We are not permitted to escape into pure religion that has no risk of contamination. That escape is not possible because Nathan’s oracle was first uttered in the presence of power, and he knew exactly to whom he spoke.

5. I judge this oracle with its unconditional promise to David to be the most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament, but it is not the whole of Old Testament faith. This core statement of royal faith is a bold departure from the conditional character of the Mosaic “if” (cf. Ex. 19:4–6). Sound interpretation requires us to recognize that while the covenantal “if is silenced in this theology, it has not been nullified. Therefore, interpretation must struggle with the tension of “if” and “nevertheless” that is present in the Bible, in our own lives, and in the very heart of God.

There is no easy resolution of this tension. It is a tension that must be faced honestly and directly. The historical process teaches us about the reality of judgment and condition, so that we know about the “if” of reality from our own experience. The other side of the tension, God’s unconditional commitment, will be operative in biblical faith only if Nathan’s bold oracle of “nevertheless” is sounded as the gospel. We do not always understand how God’s utter fidelity is to be understood in the midst

of the painful breaks that occur in our common experience. God's conditional requirement and God's unconditional promise belong to biblical faith. Both belong to God's character as known in Israel. Both are crucial to the fullness of our human life. Both matter to our life with God and with each other (Bright).

II Samuel 7:18–29

Nathan's oracle is a combination of high theology and blatant ideology. David now prays in response to the oracle, a prayer of grateful deference and bold demand. David manages both to yield and to insist at the same time. It is this marvelous blend of yielding and insistence that marks David's faith and Israel's prayer at its best (cf. Brown, p. 154). David's prayer is a sequence of deference, doxology, and demand.

7:18–21. David first is properly deferential, contrasting his own insignificance with Yahweh's greatness. Indeed, the oracle of Nathan should rightly evoke such a sense of astonishment that this God would take such attentive notice of this shepherd boy become king. Four times in this prayer David speaks the awesome name "Lord GOD" (vv. 18, 19, 19, 20). David acknowledges he has no merit or worth that he dare bring to Yahweh. Yahweh's oracle is an act of utter graciousness.

7:22–24. David is driven to praise by the awareness of the contrast between God's greatness and his insignificance. In David's healthy piety, the contrast does not lead to silence, guilt, or abdication but to praise. David's praise gladly acknowledges the incomparability of Yahweh. There is no other God who "makes poor and makes rich, who brings low and exalts, who raises up the poor ... lifts the needy ... to make them sit with princes" (I Sam. 2:7–8). David should know, for he is among the lowly who have been exalted. David's focus on Yahweh's incomparability leads to an awareness of Israel's derivative incomparability. Israel is distinctive because Yahweh is distinctive. In Israel, but more specifically in David, Yahweh has enacted a *novum* in world history. All David's people must pray this prayer of grateful astonishment.

7:25–29. David is, however, not shy, reticent, or embarrassed in the presence of this incomparable God. David is characteristically bold and nervy before every protagonist, whether Goliath or Yahweh. Out of his doxology of amazement (vv. 22–24) David articulates his demand (vv. 25–29). Yahweh must indeed keep the promise of the oracle. It is as though David had first said, “You really should not have made this offer”; then he adds, “Since you did, I expect the promise to be kept.” David will not permit Yahweh to renege on the promise.

The rhetorical features in the final part of the prayer are stark in this insistence. First, God is addressed by name five times, three times as “Lord GOD” (vv. 25, 28, 29), twice as “LORD of hosts, God of Israel” (vv. 26, 27). It is as though David will not permit Yahweh to be any other God than the one Yahweh promised to be. Second, David three times utters the forceful adverb, “And now” (*we‘attah*; vv. 25, 28, 29). This is characteristically employed to deduce a demand from a preceding argument. That is, because Yahweh is incomparable and has made a promise, now I expect... . Third, the adverb “for ever” is used four times (vv. 25, 26, 29, 29). David pushes the dynastic claim to its extreme for all foreseeable generations.

The bold prayer of David is a perfect match for the remarkable oracle. David and Yahweh have reached an understanding. They now know their proper roles vis-à-vis each other. Yahweh has committed deeply to David, and David will insist on that commitment. Jerusalem is the place of the king, the city of David. David is like his father, Jacob (Gen. 32:26); David will not let Yahweh go until Yahweh blesses him, and blesses him for all time to come. David is a bold (and dangerous) model of faith. He will, without embarrassment, hold Yahweh to the promise. David will not let circumstances talk him out of the promise, and he will not despair. Nor will he, in false deference, release Yahweh from the promise. David will neither despair in the world nor defer at the throne. David is a hard bargainer both on earth and before heaven. David dazzles his fellows and perhaps comes near to intimidating Yahweh. Yahweh, however, has invited that kind of relation with David.

II Samuel 8

Expansion of the Empire

This chapter concerns two distinct matters, the expansion of David's empire (vv. 1–14) and the development of David's bureaucracy (vv. 15–18).

II Samuel 8:1–14

According to Flanagan's scheme, this unit corresponds to 5:17–25. In the former, David fought the Philistines. The Philistines are Israel's traditional enemy, and David does the traditional thing. But now, in this new report, the Philistines are not mentioned after verse 1. They have been eliminated as a military threat. The new David no longer thinks about defense but about expansion. David seeks new territory, perhaps for control of new resources or trade routes. In order to expand, David must face new enemies. David takes territory to the east (Moab, v. 2), to the northeast (Zobah, vv. 3–8), to the north (Hamath, vv. 9–10), and to the south (Edom, vv. 13–14; see the comprehensive list of v. 12).

The oracle of chapter 7 had promised David rule over Israel. The other nations were not mentioned. In chapter 8 David outruns the mandate of the oracle. In doing this he is indeed "like all the nations." He is a king who will "go out before us and fight our battles" (I Sam. 8:20). The report of David's expansion and his carefully wrought network of power is a delicate balance between human aggression and divine blessing. The reporter is greatly impressed with David. Moreover, "David won a name for himself" (v. 13). There is no doubt that David made a name for himself. This formula suggests that David is tempted to a posture of autonomy in which he regards his success as his achievement, not as a gift from Yahweh.

The text is shrewd and careful, adding in verses 6 and 14 that Yahweh "gave victory wherever David went." It was David. It was Yahweh. It was not David without Yahweh, it was not Yahweh without David. This intimate connection between human achievement and divine gift is anticipated in chapter 7 and is an expression of the conviction that "Yahweh was with

him” (cf. I Sam. 16:18), always, everywhere, in all he did. The narrative denies neither the rule of Yahweh nor the powerful, peculiar gifts of David.

In this delicately balanced presentation we are very close to state ideology. The advance of the empire and the enhancement of David’s reputation and of David’s treasury are gifts from Yahweh. David or his ideologues are very close to identifying the rule of God and the rule of David. In making that claim, the ideologues do not ponder that the empire must be an alien development in the faith of Israel. The tradition of Moses, Joshua, and Samuel could not have envisioned an empire. David has completely shifted the terms in which faith is discerned. Yahweh is now the patron of the empire.

David has preempted the faith of old Israel for his new venture. The powerful ideology of the monarchy can redefine faith and transform obedience into power. This theological, ideological achievement illustrates the problem of every great nation-state in any period of history that tries to legitimate itself in terms of old religious tradition. There is a clear mismatch between old religious tradition and new political-military ambition. That mismatch in ancient Israel is between the old notion of being “God’s holy people” and the ambitious state of David and Solomon, which did not order its policies according to covenant.

In contemporary practice, a parallel mismatch between rationale and reality may be suggested. The old claim of being God’s people as “a beacon set on a hill” becomes rationale for political and military adventurism that destabilizes other governments; such action serves ideological interests but is not congruent with traditional religious self-understanding. Wordmongers then and now, however, are capable of hiding the mismatch and recruiting religionists to support the new ambition. We thus find it possible to justify multinational corporations in the rhetoric of the old market economy. Or we find it possible to defend brutal technological warfare in the old rhetoric of freedom and democracy. chapter 8 can be read as an example of the ways in which large ideological claims cover over politics that are in fact betrayals of old convictions.

II Samuel 8:15–18

These verses characterize David's administrative arrangement and correspond to the list of 5:13–16. That first list reported David's family and kinship network. At the end of the literary unit of chapters 5–8 we have a very different list of officials. The expansion of territory, wealth, and military hardware undoubtedly requires an expanded bureaucracy.

8:15. This is a summary statement indicating David had assumed responsibility for governance. David is the chief magistrate. David has taken over the “judging” functions of Samuel. This verse, by mention of “justice and equity,” also asserts how David or any king must judge (cf. Ps. 72:1–4; Isa. 9:7; Jer. 22:15–16). The prophets valued this model of justice (cf. Isa. 5:7; Amos 5:6, 24). The administration of justice and equity is the agenda for kingship that David inherits from the old covenantal tradition. We must wait and see if David will remember these old traditions as his monarchy grows and his power increases.

8:16–18. These verses describe in more detail how the instruments of power and justice were administered. The list reflects an important departure from the simpler order of Saul. The three agencies noted are military (Joab as commander, Benaiah as head of the mercenaries), “statistics” (records useful for taxation and draft), and priesthood (which nicely balances the traditions of Zadok and Abiathar). These three functions give David control over every phase of public life. In arranging power in this way, David made the very changes Samuel so much resisted.

In reading chapter 8, we should reflect on how strange the report of David's governance must have sounded to those in Israel who could still hear the cadences of the demands of Moses and the promises of Joshua. The narrator is marvelously restrained. There is no hint of explanation and surely no explicit criticism.

chapters 5–8 are shaped and presented in order to assert that God's promises to David have indeed been fully kept (cf. Josh. 21:43–45). David was promised much from God, and now David's prosperity, prestige, power, security, and well-being overflow. Moreover, David and his advisers have found ways to organize all these blessings for maximum royal effectiveness.

Such enormous blessings constitute for David (as for us all) enormous temptations. Well-being seduces us into forgetting the God who blesses, tempts us into thinking ourselves autonomous and self-made (cf. Deut.

8:11–18). In the face of such temptations and seductions, the old religious claims have a fragile authority. As we reach this narrative culmination of David's success, we are left to wonder if the old covenantal themes of justice, mercy, and obedience will be viable in the new power arrangement of Jerusalem. We wonder if David will heed those old traditions or if such ancient claims are to be reduced to window dressing, convenient rationalization and reassurance for those who still care about religious legitimacy. The narrative does not answer our wonderment. Things are left open-ended. When we remember David's modest beginnings and the odd course by which Yahweh has led him to power, we wait with some uneasiness to see if the old claims will be honored. David is a powerful, faithful man. David is also tempted by his power, against his faith. The future shape of the ongoing tension between old claim and new power is sure to be a delicate balance, one that requires a cunning, artistic narrative for its telling.

PART FIVE

The Family of David

II SAMUEL 9–20

But we have this treasure
in earthen vessels, to show that
the transcendent power belongs
to God and not to us. We are
afflicted in every way, but not
crushed; perplexed, but not driven
to despair; persecuted, but not
forsaken; struck down, but
not destroyed.

II Corinthians 4:7–9

At II Samuel 9 we begin a new literature. Ever since Rost in 1926, scholars have operated on the hypothesis that chapter 9 begins the succession narrative. Rost proposed (with special reference to I Kings 1:27) that the entire literature of II Samuel 9–20 and I Kings 1–2 is singularly concerned with the question, “Who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?” Thus the name “succession narrative” identifies the theme and purpose of this literature, according to Rost. Rost understood that this entire literature (including I Kings 1–2) was the story of how Solomon succeeded to David’s throne after the sequential disposal of Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah, each of whom in turn had a legitimate claim. Rost’s hypothesis dominated scholarly discussion for four decades. Then a number of questions were raised, concerning where the literature begins, whether it is a unit, and what its purpose might be. The literature probably

is not as narrowly fixed on the question of succession as Rost surmised but concerns the demise and failure of David's career (Carlson).

While there is some disagreement about the hypothesis of a succession narrative, all scholars agree that this is a peculiarly powerful and artistic literature. The sensitivity of the narrative is acute, both in its discernment of human motivation and interaction and in its artistic articulation of the inscrutable forces which drive human action and thought. Gerhard von Rad has provided one of the most penetrating analyses of this material. He observed that the hiddenness of God's action in the narrative embodies a bold experiment in the portrayal of human reality. This is not to say that the literature is devoid of Yahwistic substance but that the theological dimension is presented in intensely cunning and artistic ways.

Second Samuel 9–20 cuts underneath the uncritical ideological claims we have witnessed in chapters 5–8. It dares to articulate the interior hurt, anguish, conflict, and ambiguity that operate in these hard-nosed players of the royal game. It dares to affirm that for all the public appearance of official reality, there is another dimension of reality in which the royal figures are utterly human in their hurt, their hate, and their hope. This literature is an invitation to see behind the ideology, to discern what humanness is all about when lived in the presence of this haunting God and in the presence of earthly power that invites, seduces, and destroys. The impact of this literature, so ancient and so contemporary, is that it tells us, like every great drama or novel, how in fact it is with *us*. Because we are so prone to self-deception, mostly we do not experience our own situation honestly or directly. That is why we need artistic portrayal at a distance to see ourselves up close. This literature permitted the family of David to see itself up close, if it wanted to look.

I do not wish to contemporize this literature excessively or to read it with overstated existentialist pertinence. It is, after all, about David and not about us. We see ourselves in this literature only at a distance. The attractiveness of David and his power for us in this literature is that he is like us and we are so like him. In watching David closely we learn something of our own hurts, hates, and hopes. We catch glimpses, moreover, of the shadowed way in which God is keeping the promises of chapter 7 through and in the midst of the pathos and sordidness of too much power coupled with too little self-doubt.

II Samuel 9—14

David: The King and the Man

II Samuel 9:1–13

David is a man of loyalty (*hesed*). He is not “kind” to everyone, but he is loyal to those to whom he has obligation. To outsiders he can be brutal and ruthless (cf. 8:2, 5), but to those in the scope of his promise he is gracious and steadfast.

We have seen how difficult David’s relation to the house of Saul is. Saul’s continuing party is the greatest threat to David’s rule. The fortuitous elimination of Abner helped (3:26–30), but the old Saulide loyalty did not die quickly in the north. For all David’s trouble about the waning house of Saul, he remains a man under oath. He had sworn *hesed* to Jonathan in perpetuity (I Sam. 20:14–17; cf. I Sam. 23:18; 24:21–22). Thus, in this new literature, David’s first agenda is his oath and Saul’s house.

9:1–8. Three times in this paragraph the word *hesed* is used (vv. 1, 3, 7). David had not only promised *hesed* to Jonathan, he knew Saul’s house traded in *hesed* (2:5). David must discover who it is that still warrants his loyalty.

David and his advisers do not have that information. They know they have eliminated most of the serious contenders for power. Thus, if there is someone left of Saul’s house, it is likely to be some unknown person who is marginal and politically insignificant. The others have all died.

David learns of the nominee for *hesed* from Ziba, a man of Saul’s. There is a son of Jonathan, grandson of Saul, who is “smitten in his feet” (v. 3). He is handicapped. This last detail is probably reported to explain to David why he has never heard of him, or perhaps to assure David that the grandson is no military or political threat. It is noteworthy that the name of the man is not mentioned. He is a no-name. He really does not matter, but he is entitled to the promise of David. No doubt he is also useful to David,

rather like a White House media event with a poor family, to show that the government has not forgotten the politically powerless. On all these counts, Saul's unimportant grandson is summoned to court. He must have been frightened to come to David's court, because this same David had all but exterminated his family (cf. 21:1–14). But he has no option. The king has summoned. He comes, fear and all.

The meeting between Saul's handicapped grandson, who is an endangered species, and the strong, ruthless, but oath-keeping king is a study in deference and power (vv. 6–8). David speaks only one word at first. He utters the name of the man: "Mephibosheth" (v. 6). We wonder that David knew the name, for it has not been told him since he first learned of the grandson's existence. But David knows. His knowledge of the name of Mephibosheth without being told is parallel to Saul's knowledge of David's name without being told (I Sam. 16:19; cf. 17:58). Perhaps the two occurrences are only according to convention. Or perhaps the narrator intends to show that what Saul has done David can also do. In uttering the name, the king establishes his control over the one he names. Mephibosheth's answer is appropriate and in keeping with David's power. He does not answer by naming David or, we may guess, by looking David in the eye (cf. Luke 18:13). He only acknowledges his subservient role (v. 6).

David's second address to Mephibosheth is a salvation oracle, which begins with a standard assurance, "Do not fear" (v. 7). How incongruous that the words "Do not fear" are spoken by the king who has eliminated the boy's family! David immediately gives two specific reasons why Mephibosheth should not fear, however. First, David's oath to Jonathan is operative, and David speaks the word *hesed* for the third time in this chapter (v. 7; cf. vv. 1, 3). Second, even more concretely, David restores to Mephibosheth the landed property of Saul's family that apparently had been confiscated and provides Mephibosheth with an honored place at the king's court. Critics regularly note that this last action is also a way to keep surveillance on the heir to Saul, but the accent is on generosity and the honoring of Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth's second response, like his first, is one of deference and subservience (v. 8). In both brief statements, he styles himself "servant."

9:9–13. The remainder of this chapter gives evidence that David is serious about restoring land to Mephibosheth. We do not have any details about why the land of Saul has been lost or taken, but now it is given back by action of the throne. In addition to restoring the land, David authorizes the family and household of Ziba to work on behalf of Mephibosheth. We are not told why Ziba is pressed into service, except he must have been a trusted party in the Saul establishment (v. 2). The fields of Saul must have been extensive, because Ziba's large work force of sons and servants is assigned to it (v. 10). Ziba is submissive and obedient to David (v. 11).

The outcome of David's action is that Mephibosheth has secure income of his own, is honored like David's own sons, and does indeed join the household of David. The narrator oddly ends his account of David and Mephibosheth by reminding the reader of Mephibosheth's crippled condition: "He was lame in both feet" (v. 13; cf. v. 3). This concluding line may be a reminder to us that Mephibosheth is disqualified from leading a separatist movement. Or perhaps David is not as magnanimous as he appears, for he honors only a disqualified person. While this chapter seems to settle the Saul question, we have not heard the last of Mephibosheth and Ziba. The crown still rests uneasily on David's head, for the Saul party refuses to disappear (cf. 16:1–4; 19:24–20).

II Samuel 10:1–19

In chapter 9, as he had vowed he would do, David practices *hesed* with the house of Saul. In chapter 10 (which forms a nice counterpoint to chapter 9), David again proposes to practice *hesed* (v. 2). In chapter 9 it was *hesed* inside Israel. In this narrative it is *hesed* outside Israel, with the house of Nahash (cf. I Sam. 11:1–11). David is thus portrayed on all fronts as a man of *hesed*, seeking to honor oaths and keep faith.

10:1–2. David most likely proceeds according to international convention. When an ally dies, it is necessary to reaffirm the alliance with the ally's heir. Since Saul's defeat of Nahash, the Ammonites must have been subservient to Israel (I Sam. 11). Thus David must reaffirm his dominance of Ammon when the father, Nahash, dies. The action is parallel to the action of a government in sending a high official to the funeral of a leader of an

allied state in order to meet the new leader and to affirm solidarity. David intends that treaty solidarity should continue with the Ammonites. He does not want the relationship changed. In the narrative, David begins his interaction with the Ammonites by a gesture of *hesed* (v. 2). His gesture, however, is rebuffed and his *hesed* rejected (vv. 3–4).

10:3–5. The new Ammonite king, unlike his father, sees no need to remain subservient. His advisers take a hard line (v. 3). They mistrust David's motives and urge a harsh response (cf. a parallel of advisers in I Kings 12:6–11). Hanun, king of the Ammonites, commits a deliberately provocative act by shaving and defrocking the ambassadors of David (v. 4). Such actions were a clear humiliation, for they exposed the “manhood” of the messengers. The king must have known that such an act was unacceptable and intolerable to any monarchy, and certainly to David. The Ammonites clearly intend war with David in order to end their subservient position.

Before the war narrative opens, David displays his remarkable sensitivity toward his humiliated men (v. 5). He gives them a chance to regrow their beards and recover their signs of manhood before making a public appearance in Jerusalem. This verse is a nice aside, indicating why David could command such tenacious loyalty. He was characteristically able to attend to the human dimensions of power transactions.

10:6–18. The regrowth of beards in Jericho is only an interlude. Both parties understand that there must be war. It cannot be averted, because such a provocative act of humiliation cannot go unanswered. Of such triviality are the causes of war!

David finds himself faced with a formidable alliance of Syrians and men of Tob (vv. 6–8). Verse 6 reports that the Ammonites “hired” their allies. Against this array, David relies on the bravery and leadership of Joab, the same Joab who has been so problematic to David.

Joab devises a strategy to fight on two fronts. Joab leads against the Syrians, his brother Abishai against the Ammonites. Joab's leadership includes careful strategy (vv. 9–10), but it also includes the stirring rhetoric of faith and patriotism (vv. 11–12), reminiscent of the old summons to holy war (cf. Deut. 20:3–4). Joab's strategy and pluckiness in the first encounter are successful. The enemy withdraws, and Joab returns to David in

Jerusalem (vv. 13–14). Notice that the narrator gives no suggestion that David himself is in the battle.

In the second encounter (vv. 15–18), more troops are brought by the enemy. Now David himself takes the field (v. 17) and wins a mighty victory. This material is sober military description. There is no rhetorical flourish beyond the data of the battle, and no attribution of success to Yahweh, as in chapter 8.

10:19. The outcome of the various confrontations is that peace is freshly established on David's terms. David wins and the Syrians submit. Thus far the power, reputation, and territory of David are fully intact.

Chapter 10 by itself has no great theological significance for us. It must surely be interpreted in its larger setting. Two reasons may be given for its placement here. First, this narrative looks ahead to the war account in chapters 11 and 12. Matters are not yet settled with the Ammonites, who first initiated the conflict. That struggle must be continued in 11:1 and 12:26–31. The continuing conflict with the Ammonites has led scholars to suggest that chapter 10 is placed here to provide a context for the next narrative, concerning Uriah and Bathsheba (McCarter 1984). This credible rationale for chapter 10 suggests that the narrative has no real interest in the Ammonite war, except as a context for the more personal episode upon which hangs the shape and future of David's public life.

Second, it may also be that chapter 10 looks back as a foil to chapter 9 and that the two chapters together concern David's *hesed*. As David showed *hesed* to Mephibosheth (9:1, 3, 7), so he proposes to show *hesed* to Hanun (10:2). Thus the narrative offers a positive characterization of David as a man of fidelity. It is evident in chapter 10 that David's fidelity is not to be mistaken for cowardice or softness. David can keep *hesed* with allies; at the beginning of chapter 10, he regards Hanun as an ally, albeit a subservient ally. David, however, is not to be taken advantage of, for he will respond with fierceness and decisiveness to the rejection of his *hesed*. Thus the narrative presents the limits of David's fidelity beyond which David will act with all the eagerness for blood that has marked his career. chapters 9–10 form a kind of introduction for the real action now to be presented by the narrator.

II Samuel 11:1–27

We are now at the pivotal turning point in the narrative plot of the books of Samuel. We are also invited into the presence of delicate, subtle art. We are at the threshold of deep, aching psychology, and at the same time we are about to witness a most ruthless political performance. In this narrative we are in the presence of greatness. For David and for Israel, we are at a moment of no return. Innocence is never to be retrieved. From now on the life of David is marked, and all Israel must live with that mark. We pause before this artistic rendering, because this text, like none other we have considered, has the power and the subtlety to address us. If we face this text at all, we are soon invited behind all the critical, scholarly questions to face the harder questions of human desire and human power—desire with all its delight, power with all its potential for death.

The plot in its telling is not complex or complicated. Yet we dare not treat the narrative as simple. We must be awestruck that we have such a rendering of life before us. We may wonder what made this artistic achievement possible or what made this terrible disclosure necessary. My sense is that here, of all places in Samuel, we may indeed speak of inspired writing without recourse to any mechanical theory of inspiration. The writer has cut very, very deep into the strange web of foolishness, fear, and fidelity that comprises the human map. This narrative is more than we want to know about David and more than we can bear to understand about ourselves. We might wish the story about David could be “untold.” David’s memory cannot be unwritten (though the writer of I Chron. 20:1–3 gave it a try), any more than our shared life with David can be undone.

The text is placed at the exact point where the narrative shifts from public triumph (II Sam. 5–10) to personal pathos, now to be spun out in the narrative that follows (II Sam. 12–20; see Alter, p. 119). It is the abrupt transition from a life under blessing to a life under curse (Carlson). It is the intrusion of a sin into the life of David (and Israel) that cuts so sharply that it rivals in power the “original” act of Adam and Eve (Brueggemann 1968). The story is so massive and penetrating that it almost defies our capacity to interpret. Every effort fails before the subject itself, no doubt the way interpretation fails all great art.

11:1–5. The public story continues the unfinished Ammonite business of chapter 10. The Syrians have been dealt with, but the “Ammonite question”

is still open (10:19). The Ammonites will be properly settled only at the end of our narrative (12:26–31). For now, however, there is still war, still uneasiness, still a chance for heroism. David dispatches Joab, as has become his habit (cf. 10:7). This story of public warfare is changed decisively, however, by the narrator's words: "David stayed in Jerusalem" (v. 1; cf. 18:3). David was not in the action but stays behind to initiate other action.

These four words at the end of the verse change the subject of the narrative. All the terror of war and the confusion of battle are bracketed out, making way for another kind of terror and confusion. There is a powerful silence back in Jerusalem with this king, who now seems so settled and sure that his mind—and body—can wander from the military action. David has ceased to be a chieftain and now relies on agents to do his work. He has ceased to be the king requested by Israel who would "go out before us and fight our battles" (I Sam. 8:20).

David has been resting on his couch (v. 2). He was at leisure and saw what he wanted, a woman "very beautiful." We do not know her name. David asks her name, but he does not measure the cost of his desire. He gets her name; her name is dangerously hyphenated: "Bathsheba—daughter of Eliam, wife of Uriah the Hittite." She has no existence of her own but is identified by the men to whom she belongs. Now David knows who she is—and whose she is. David does not pause, however, because he is the king. The mention of Uriah might have given David pause, but it does not. David acts swiftly, as he has always done. He is not a pensive or brooding man but one who will have his way.

The action is quick. The verbs rush as the passion of David rushed. He sent; he took; he lay (v. 4). The royal deed of self-indulgence does not take very long. There is no adornment to the action. The woman then gets some verbs: she returned, she conceived. The action is so stark. There is nothing but action. There is no conversation. There is no hint of caring, of affection, of love—only lust. David does not call her by name, does not even speak to her. At the end of the encounter she is only "the woman" (v. 5). The verb that finally counts is "conceived." But the telling verb is "he took her." Long ago Samuel had warned that kings are takers (I Sam. 8:11–19). Gunn (1975) calls it "grasping." Mostly David has not had to take. He had everything gladly given to him by Yahweh, by Jonathan, by Abigail, by his adoring followers.

We have before us in chapter 11 a transformed David, however. Now he is in control. He can have whatever he wants, no restraint, no second thoughts, no reservations, no justification. He takes simply because he can. He is at the culmination of his enormous power.

In verse 5 the woman speaks for the first time. She says only two words, but they are utterly shattering: “I am pregnant” (*harah ’anoki*). David is not the last person to have his world shattered by this message. Nonetheless the world-shattering words of Bathsheba completely nullify the royal power of David. David had been in control. Now, in an instant, as long as this message takes, his control ends. Notice “the woman” makes no demand or threat. Her words say enough and say it all.

11:6–13. David acts with characteristic quickness and decisiveness. There is no vacillation, no debate, no “saying in his heart.” David acts (v. 6). He sends to Joab. Who else? David sends word to the front, proposing to reach a public solution to a personal dilemma. Uriah is summoned (v. 6) and he comes (v. 7). Uriah is a man responsive to authority. In verse 7 David engages in formal inquiry, the kind of conversation a commander-in-chief would have by way of debriefing a field man. Three times the verse uses the word *šalom*, the welfare of Joab, the welfare of the people, the welfare of the war. (Notice that the narrator employed a threefold use of *šalom* in anticipation of the death of Abner in 3:21–23. We should be on notice about this ominous word.) How odd that David should talk so much of shalom when he has a quite different purpose in mind. The talk may be convention. It may also serve to mislead Uriah.

Having fulfilled that conversation, David changes the subject and moves to his strategy of cover-up. One might think, with Bathsheba pregnant, the last person David needs in Jerusalem is Uriah. David, however, is a bold man. He sends Uriah to his house, to Bathsheba, with a euphemistic suggestion that Uriah have sexual intercourse: “Wash your feet” (v. 8). What must have appeared to Uriah to be familiar talk between joshing military men is in fact a crucial part of David’s strategy. If Uriah can now be seen to be involved with Bathsheba, David will be free of suspicion. The strategy is simple and in fact not very destructive. This is a solution of minimal cost.

The only problem is Uriah, who is the quintessence of fidelity. He is too disciplined for David or for his own good. David ordered him to “go down”

(v. 8). But Uriah did not “go down” (v. 9). David’s intelligence system knew immediately and reported to David that Uriah “did not go down” (v. 10). David asks Uriah why he did not “go down.” Uriah might wonder how David knew, or why David cared, but Uriah plays it straight all the way. Whatever Uriah thinks, he keeps to himself. Notice in verses 8–10 we have the verb “go down” four times. The words pound at us with rhetorical stress. It is the only thing David now wants. It is the one thing Uriah will not do. It is the one thing powerful David cannot have, much as he wants it!

Uriah’s response to David’s query is without guile (v. 11). The ark and Israel and Judah and Joab and the troops (servants) are all in the field, at risk. Everything Uriah cares about is at risk. In that context Uriah will not eat, drink, or lie at ease. The incongruity between their risk and his comfort would be too great and would cause him to betray his very identity. The narrative portrays Uriah, quite in contrast to David, as a principled man. Uriah will not sleep with his wife while the war continues. How different David, who sleeps with the wife of another man while that man is risking his life for David in a war that was David’s war. Uriah’s words indict David. Uriah the Hittite, a foreigner, is not even a child of the torah. But he is faithful. It is a stunning moment of disclosure and contrast.

We may wonder if Uriah is so innocent and unknowing. Sternberg wonders about what Uriah knew and what David thought Uriah knew (pp. 201–213). Uriah, however, has the restraint and discipline of a dutiful soldier. He is not accustomed to giving his opinion, for commanders do not ask for opinions. We do not know what he knew. David does not know if Uriah knows or not, and that greatly complicates David’s action. What must he further conceal, and how much dare he presume? If Uriah knew of David’s plan, David could be more forthright. And if Uriah did not know, David could be more forthright. It is the uncertainty that baffles, frustrates, and prevents David from having freedom to act.

David will not bargain or cajole or beg. He is a king, even if he is in trouble. By verse 12 it is clear that David has quickly abandoned the strategy of “going down.” David now knows that his intent to implicate Uriah was a miscalculation of Uriah’s principled character. Thus, on Uriah’s last night, David spends it eating and drinking with Uriah. How crass and cynical. David does not get drunk; he stays in control. But Uriah gets drunk. Indeed, the text specifies that David “made him drunk.” David’s cynical use of the loyal Hittite is quite explicit in this simple scene of drinking. David is

thinking and planning. Is David in this odd intimacy with the Hittite playing a role? Or has he so compromised himself in his next strategy that this is a pitiful guilt-induced act of friendship? All of that is hidden. We are left to draw our own conclusions. The scene ends with the ominous refrain, “Uriah did not go down” (v. 13). Everything in David’s plan depended on Uriah “going down.” David could no more control the principled Uriah than he could manage the pregnancy of Uriah’s wife.

11:14–25. The shift of scene from verse 13 to verse 14 is nicely articulated. Verse 13 is “in the evening”; verse 14 is “in the morning.” We are not told what happened in the night, between verse 13 and verse 14. Uriah no doubt slept off his drunk, like any good soldier before ending his R and R. David must have been busy: pacing, thinking, plotting frantically. He is very close to losing control. But of course he does not.

David’s second strategy of cover-up begins, as in verse 6, with Joab (v. 14). When all else fails, there is Joab. David sends a letter (vv. 14–15). The order is so ominous that it must be in writing. Joab is tough and knowing enough that he will not be made a scapegoat over such an order unless it is in writing. David understands Joab and does not flinch from creating a document that would stand against him in court. David is shamelessly desperate. Not only does he drink with Uriah, replicating friendship, but now he sends Uriah to the front. Uriah must carry the letter that is his own death warrant. The letter is a precise suggestion of how to get Uriah conveniently killed, so that the pregnancy can be assigned to Uriah without protest.

Joab does not make an inquiry about the king’s order. Joab does not need to know everything. He knows enough. Joab can read between the lines of the dispatch. Joab knows what is expected. He executes the king’s order obediently and effectively (v. 16). Joab is the kind of hatchet man every king must have, someone who acts always in the interest of the king without scruple or reservation. Joab puts Uriah not only where the fighting is heaviest but where the toughest opponents are. Along with others, Uriah is killed. The second attempt at cover-up works easily and quickly.

The report to the king of this battle skirmish must be prepared carefully (vv. 18–21). The report is more important and more delicate than the act itself. Powerful people must frame press notices very carefully. Joab takes time to tell the messenger (press officer) exactly what to say (vv. 18–21).

Joab is aware that he has used what was militarily a foolish strategy. He does not want to be blamed for such a strategy. He makes sure that David understands such a strategy was necessary for the elimination of Uriah. Joab must cast his report in subtle, misleading language so that only the king can understand. Joab anticipates David's heated, fraudulent objection to his strategy. Obviously it is foolish to go near the wall, for the soldiers are so exposed that they can be killed by a woman dropping a stone from above (cf. Judg. 9:50–54 for a precedent). Probably David will raise all these objections to detract from his own plot or to play the role of the caring commander. But, instructs Joab, “just say, ‘Uriah the Hittite is dead’ ” (v. 21). Joab knows that sentence will stop the probe. Joab is so close to David's guilty reasoning that he knows David will not care if an entire regiment is lost so long as it includes Uriah.

Messengers have dangerous work, for they may be killed if the message displeases (cf. 18:19–23). The messenger's report goes well beyond what happened in verses 16–17 and well beyond the instruction of Joab in verses 19–21. David cannot get straight data. The layers of deception read like U.S. intelligence reports from Vietnam, in which everyone lied about the real war. The messenger's deception does not matter, because David does not want true reports in this case. David wants only one thing. He cuts through all the verbiage, only half listening, to see about this single line in the report. The messenger has taken his cue from Joab. He saves the crucial line until the end: “Uriah the Hittite is also dead” (v. 24).

David exhales slowly with relief. Never mind about the other deaths, the rest of the report. The one thing that needed to happen has happened. The pregnancy is reassigned. David is free of the burden. The truth has been concealed. The guilt is passed. The monarchy is saved.

David's response in verse 25, his word back to Joab, is wondrously cynical. Indeed, David has grown visibly more cynical as the narrative advances. David instructs the messenger to say to Joab, “Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes.” (The RSV translation of David's words [v. 25] destroys the parallel we shall see in v. 27. “Trouble you” is too weak, for the word “evil” is important to the statement.) David presumes now to be a moral arbiter, and he assures Joab that he and Joab have not perpetrated evil. “Do not feel guilty about this because it is the way of war.” People die all the time in war, and you must not be exercised.

David's cynicism reaches its culmination here, even as the story reaches its culmination. In his fear and anxiety, David has set himself against the whole moral tradition of his people. Formally he is correct—the torah has not condemned killing that is necessary to war—but David knows better. This was no act of war. This was an act of malice and cunning that cannot claim the excuse of war. Uriah's death is not an excusable accident of war but a dark necessity of royal power. In this message back to Joab, David is either morally numbed, so that he cannot “discern between good and evil” (cf. II Sam. 14:14; I Kings 3:9), or he is incredibly cynical, because he no longer cares to notice what he can discern. The narrator leaves these two options open.

11:26–27. The narrator pauses in the story to record quickly two events that happened after the murder of Uriah. These matters are not told with narrative tension and, indeed, have dramatic power only because they are reported so tersely. First, Bathsheba mourned Uriah and David married Bathsheba. Second, Bathsheba bore to David the son conceived in verses 2–5. Remarkably, Bathsheba is not called by her own name, even in this royal wedding announcement. She is called by her right name, only identified by reference to Uriah to whom she is married. She is “the wife of Uriah.” That is how the narrator wants us to regard her. That is who she will always be; David's daring, ruthless act will not alter that fact. Even in the royal genealogy of Matthew (ch. 1), in which Tamar (v. 3), Rahab and Ruth (v. 5), and Mary (v. 16) have their own names, Bathsheba remains “the wife of Uriah” (v. 6).

Finally, as a concluding verdict, the narrative adds, “the thing was evil in the eyes of Yahweh” (v. 27). Uriah had refused to do “this thing” (v. 11), which meant only sleeping with his wife. But “this thing” in verse 27 is much larger. It is the murder of the very one who had been most loyal. Notice that Yahweh does not do anything. We have no word of punishment from Yahweh. We get only a sure sense of moral coherence. The story has been told in the presence of Yahweh, and it could have no other verdict at the end: “The thing was evil in the eyes of Yahweh” (v. 27). The formula of condemnation is precisely parallel to David's message to Joab (v. 25), “Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes.” (David might have added, “It is not evil in my eyes.”) The eyes of David (and of Joab) are not so discerning about what is morally acceptable.

By juxtaposing verse 25 and verse 27, the narrator has skillfully shown that royal perceptions of reality are not congruent with Yahweh's perception (cf. Prov. 16:2). The royal seductions of power and security have skewed the moral vision of Israel. The king may act. The king may kill. The king may be self-satisfied. The king, however, is not capable of revising moral reality. The king may imagine he has escaped the hard, non-negotiable reality of the old torah tradition. The king may imagine he is morally autonomous and subject to no one. In the end, however, the end of the narrative, there is Yahweh with another moral vision. The narrative leaves us in no doubt that the eyes of Yahweh will outsee the eyes of David. David may not see clearly, blinded as he is by fear, lust, and power, but that does not change the moral reality to which David must answer.

II Samuel 12:1–31

12:1–6. David thought no one would notice, but he failed to reckon with the seeing eyes of Yahweh and the discerning word of Nathan. In 11:3, 4, 14, 16, David “sent.” Now, in 12:1, Yahweh sends. David no longer sends; he only receives. He has no option. Nathan, the one who is sent, comes. We do not know how Nathan got there, but he obviously belongs in David's presence. He engages David and David must listen. Astonishingly, even in his growing cynicism, David must wait and listen to this awesome voice from outside royal perception.

The parable is clear and simple (vv. 1–4). There were two men, one rich and one poor. The rich man is not very interesting. It does not take long to describe and dismiss him. He had everything—period. End of description. The poor man occupies our attention. He had one female lamb. The lamb was his whole property, his livelihood. The narrative takes great time to sketch the poor man clearly and vividly. This one lamb was like a treasured daughter, which he nurtured and to which he gave food and drink from his own cup. This precious lamb lies in the man's bosom, treasured and safe.

The rich man needed lunch. He did not want to kill his own sheep, even though he had plenty of herds and flocks. The rich man is quite ingenious. He took the lamb—daughter of the poor man. The word calls attention to itself: “He took.” It is the word Samuel used in 8:11–19 to anticipate the self-centered king, because only kings take. It is the word reporting David's

action in 11:4. David took Bathsheba. The rich man took the lamb and ate it for dinner. He took what was not his and treated it as if it were his own. Nathan's story is subtle in its wording. It obviously makes an economic contrast between great and little. With the words "lie" and "took," however, there is also an accusation of rape. The rich man raped the daughterlike treasure of the poor man. This is a tale of cynicism, selfishness, destruction, and greed.

The parable does its powerful work. David's response is immediate, indignant, and on target. David is properly appalled at the crassness of the rich man who acts in ways that are economically and sexually destructive. The rich man receives a harsh royal indictment (v. 5). The king, accustomed to conducting judicial procedure, indicts and sentences (cf. 15:1–6). Death is in order. Reparation must be made.

12:7–15a. The narrative struggles with how truth shall speak to power. The prophet addresses the king. Such speech is dangerous business, especially to address a king so cynical and desperate. The parable is the right strategy, for it permits the king to draw his own unavoidable conclusion. David could rightly discern the parable. What he does not discern is how the parable touches his own situation.

In verse 7 there is a daring change of rhetoric. Now the address of Nathan is bold and direct. There is no more artistic finesse. Now there is direct prophetic speech. It is a high-risk moment. Yet the word must be uttered, even to this David who most likely is surrounded by yes-men. Prophetic speech is still permitted in Israel, for such speech is constitutive of Israel's self-discernment. A king must not only tolerate but heed a prophet. The essential interpretation of the self-indicting parable is made in the succinct statement of verse 7: "You are the man!"

Verses 7b–12 contain a long speech placed in the mouth of Yahweh, interrupted only by a second messenger formula ("Thus says the LORD") in verse 11. Yahweh begins by reviewing past gracious action toward David (vv. 7b–8). This action is dominated by the verb "give." (Note the contrast to "take.") The recital closely parallels 7:8–11. God has been faithful and will do more for David in the future. The reference to "master's house" and "master's wives" refers to David's displacement of Saul, which David accomplished with Yahweh's sanction (v. 8). From this review Yahweh proceeds to the indictment (v. 9).

The indictment indicates that David imagined himself autonomous, not responsive to Yahweh's governing word. The reference to "evil in his eyes" looks back to the comment of 11:27. The particulars of the indictment are in the verbs "smite, take, kill." The three commandments David violated are the prohibitions on killing, adultery, and coveting. In this series of verbs, the verb "take"—the verb of adultery and coveting—is framed by the two verbs of killing. David has violated crucial claims of the torah. He has also violated the gifts of Yahweh and the deep commitment Yahweh has made to him.

The sentence of the lawsuit (vv. 10–12) is introduced by a standard "therefore" and is massive in its threat, far-reaching in its scope. The sentence ordains a "sword" over David, David's house, and David's family for all time to come. David's Jerusalem establishment shall never be free of conflict, trouble, and destructiveness. The sentence fits the affront. It was by the sword (albeit of the Ammonites, v. 9) that David did his killing work. The sword also provides David with the rationale to excuse his action (v. 25).

Now a long destiny of sword-shaped life is promised, played out in the bloody history of David's sons and, indeed, in the long course of the monarchy until the coming of deathly Babylon (II Kings 24–25). One might not expect one single act and its cover-up to hover so ominously and for so long. Such a hovering of danger from Yahweh belongs to the world of prophetic reality. That way of discerning ongoing life is in sharp contrast to the royal notion of reality, in which there is no such moral coherence or such long-term moral seriousness. For prophetic reality, the rule of Yahweh pervades even royal actions, whereas the king imagined himself immune from the demanding governance of Yahweh. In the royal narrative of chapter 11 and the prophetic verdict of chapter 12, the text juxtaposes these two views of historical reality. David has been seduced by the royal view; the king now is shown to be answerable to the covenantal prophetic reality, which he cannot escape.

In I Samuel 15:28 (cf. 28:17), David had been the "neighbor" who was better than Saul and who thus would receive the throne. In II Samuel 12:11, David's son Absalom is the "neighbor" who will rise up out of David's own house, claim the throne, and preempt David's wives in a way to humiliate David (cf. 16:20–22). David seized Bathsheba secretly; Absalom will seize

David's wives publicly, for all to see. The royal answering for David's affront will be long and costly.

David's response in verse 13 is remarkable: "I have sinned." We might conclude David has no option; he was caught red-handed and had to confess. But in fact he did not have to confess. A lesser man—perhaps his son Solomon—would not have confessed but would have eliminated the prophet instead. The elimination of Nathan could have been easily done, but David did not move against Nathan. David's confession comes very late, but at least David has submitted. In the eleventh hour, David acknowledges himself to be a child of the torah.

There is not much to celebrate about David in this narrative. The narrator nevertheless wants us to notice two things about this portrayal of David. First, concerning David, it is evident that David still has a considerable degree of moral courage and sensitivity. He is able to face up to his real situation. Second, concerning the gospel, though it is late in the narrative, it is not too late for David's repentance. David is a man who is still willing and able to cast himself on Yahweh's mercy (cf. 24:14). Yahweh is a God who will extend mercy to such a person. By the end of the narrative, David has abandoned his presumed moral autonomy of 11:2–5 and has resubmitted to the covenantal governance of Israel's faith.

David's confession consists in only two words (12:13), "I have sinned against Yahweh" (*hata'ti lyhtwh*). David's words correspond in terseness and directness to the words of Nathan (v. 7), "You are the man" (*'attah ha'ish*). The words of Nathan and David are precipitated by the words of Bathsheba (11:5), "I am pregnant" (*harah 'anoki*), words that are equally terse and direct. The entire narrative is caught in these three phrases. The first phrase of Bathsheba introduces the moral affront (11:5); David is indicted. The second, from Nathan, identifies David and his affront (12:7). In the last, David submits and turns to the only source of comfort and help (12:13). These three terse statements by Bathsheba, Nathan, and David may be simple words to utter. They are, however, very costly and risky for each speaker in turn. In their utterance we watch David being dismantled before the massive claim of Israel's torah.

We watch how costly David's words are in verse 13, as we watched the anguish of a Richard Nixon who could not speak these same words, and we watch the deathliness of refusal. But David was able! He is not unscarred. Indeed, David will never be whole and free again. But he can live, and he

begins anew. There is cost (v. 14), but David may live (v. 13). The narrative is about the high price of receiving life when we are seduced by our imagined moral and ethical autonomy. The cost is the son born out of this royal sordidness (11:27).

12:15b–23. Nathan had assessed the cost of the child (v. 14): The child will die. This family is now permanently in the presence of death. This narrative portrays the remarkable pathos and freedom of David. That is the wonder of David, before whom Israel never ceases to be amazed. He has just been incredibly cynical, and Israel denies nothing of that. In the midst of David's cynical self-serving, however, there is a powerful grandeur about him. These verses show David's capacity for a human gesture that is marked by nobility. David knows when to weep and when to relinquish his grief (cf. Eccl. 3:4).

The child does not die immediately (v. 18). The child, much treasured by David, came to David at great cost, great humiliation, great shame and dismantling. This is the child he tried to pawn off on Uriah. Now the child is sick and David wills him life with all his power. He fasts and prays (v. 16).

David's advisers do not need to report the child's death to David (vv. 18–19); he already knows. He is a master discerner of human reality. The advisers fear to tell him, but he anticipates their telling. As he finally told himself of his guilt (vv. 5–6), now he tells himself of his loss.

With the death of the child, it is time for a great show of grief; but not for David (v. 28). Painful as is his grief, David moves quickly from the feeble realm of death to the vitality of life. He dresses, he worships, and he eats (v. 20). He resumes life. His advisers did not expect his great grief earlier, nor did they expect him to shake off the grief so soon (v. 21). David is a man of vigor and of faith, however. He is not fatalistic but he will live boldly in the present, ready to turn loose of what is lost and face life where he now is. No doubt this episode is reported to show that the cost assessed by Nathan did indeed have to be paid (v. 14). Along with that dutiful report, though, we learn again of David. He persistently outdistances all normal expectations and all reasonable narrative renderings. Israel knows that David is greater than the stories we are able to tell about him.

12:24–25. In a brief but intentional and well-placed note, a second son is born to this ill-wrought marriage. The second son is legitimately conceived in wedlock. Now Bathsheba is “his wife.” Perhaps the grieved death has overcome the label “wife of Uriah.” The birth of this new son is not only another birth, recorded to indicate that the immediate curse is past; it is *the* birth, the birth that will dominate the entire story to come. The child’s name is Solomon, derived from *šalom* (shalom). He is loved and treasured by Yahweh.

The placement of Solomon’s birth in the narrative is stunning. Solomon is born so close to the sordidness, still within the echo of the prophetic lawsuit. Nonetheless, life begins again for this family. This God has an amazing capacity to work more life at the border of death, to act in promise-keeping ways (cf. 7:12) just when the promise seems exhausted. The account of David and Bathsheba is a tale of alienation and judgment; in its midst, however, are gestures of grace made by Yahweh. This birth is marked by Yahweh’s love, not anger (cf. Ps. 103:9–14).

12:26–31. The story comes now to its public conclusion. The Ammonite campaign has been under way since Hanun refused David’s *hesed* (10:2–3). All the while our painful narrative in Jerusalem has transpired, Joab has been at his faithful watch. Joab handles affairs of state while the king is too busy with his desire and his guilt. Joab succeeds. It was a hard campaign, but now it is time for victory. Even hardened Joab can be knowing and magisterial. Joab defers and invites David to come claim the victory (v. 28). This characterization of Joab, so seemingly incidental, should be noticed. Joab knows he himself is a winner. He could have claimed victory. He could have set himself up as a rival to David. Perhaps he could have won over David. Moreover, Joab could have remembered Uriah and the letters and the messenger and used the evidence against David. None of that, however, is ever mentioned. Joab does not use the damning evidence. He defers. He permits David a public success when he surely needed it to stop the gossip at court. We must pause again before a David who could command such profound loyalty.

David does not thank Joab. Kings do not write thank-you letters. David simply plays the royal role Joab assigned to him. He goes, he fights, he captures. David is still a “taker,” but the taking of cities is appropriate because it belongs to war. Joab’s was a great victory, with ample conquest.

Remarkably, David takes ample spoil (v. 30). He not only takes spoil, he brings back state slaves (v. 31). David can do many things Saul could not. Indeed, this narrative has no memory of Saul and no interest in him. Once again this narrative cannot remember that it was booty that led to Saul's dismissal (I Sam. 15:19). There are no voices of the antimonarchical opinion now raised against David. Samuel is dead. Nathan seems not to care about those old questions. Everything has been transformed in Israel. Something new is under way. Israel goes from strength to strength.

The story outruns our articulation. The greatness of the narrative cannot be uttered. Note only two things. First, this is not simply a story of sexual lust, though it is that. It is about mistaken, wrongly assumed moral autonomy. It is the telling of the heavy, sorry way of power and freedom, struggling within the elemental reality of God's rule. The story articulates and addresses the main moral issue for any culture, ancient or contemporary, which imagines itself so free, so secular, so mature, so technological that it may do whatever it wants. The story bears witness to a moral reality of Yahweh's governance that is not completely user-friendly.

Second, the delicate juxtaposition of subtle narrative (ch. 11) and prophetic confrontation (ch. 12) suggests a deliberate mode of theological disclosure. Such a mode of disclosure and argument is probably suited to a particular social environment in ancient Jerusalem. The presentation of the text is subtle and sophisticated, perhaps addressed to urbane people who are no longer persuaded by old covenantal modes of religion. In the place of those old covenantal modes, this narrative avoids didacticism and renders the crisis of David's moral autonomy in a restrained, artistic way. Although Nathan's indictment of David is direct, in fact the indictment of David has already been accomplished in the narrative before the appearance of Nathan. By following the narrative and its shrewd, calculating rhetoric, we are already aware that David has created for himself and is caught in a moral morass that is deeply dangerous to him and from which he cannot extricate himself. No heavy-handed moral judgment is needed to present the key issue about the seduction of power and the resilience of moral accountability.

Our own interpretation and presentation of this material should therefore be artistic and restrained, rather than direct and didactic. The urbane persons whom this narrative addresses do not need to be scolded, or even warned, but can be led to a fresh discernment of a theological claim

that is poignant and enduring, beyond argument or refutation. The delicacy of 11:25, 27, which contrasts David's or Joab's "eye" with the "eye of Yahweh," already articulates the main point of the narrative before the subtle parable of Nathan or his prophetic speech. Like the parable for David that evokes David's self-indictment, the narrative for us permits our self-indictment, a sensing of our own fault before anyone need speak it to us.

II Samuel 13:1–39

David has put the future of his family at risk by his greedy seizure of Uriah's wife. The remainder of the succession narrative (II Sam. 9–20; I Kings 1–2) concerns that troubled family, and particularly David's sons. chapters 13–19 concern principally Absalom. Within that larger unit, chapters 13–14 are commonly reckoned as a separate episode ostensibly having Amnon and Tamar as the lead characters. Even at the beginning (13:1) and at the end (14:33) of those chapters, however, it is Absalom to whom attention is given. As it turns out, Absalom is the most handsome of David's sons and the one with the nerve to move against David for the throne while David still lives. chapters 13–14 are in fact a story of how this son, Absalom, is banished in anger and restored in mercy. These chapters form an introduction to the longer, more poignant narrative of chapters 15–19.

13:1–6. The scene is set for the drama to follow. The drama concerns Tamar, who is beautiful. She is also Absalom's sister, a fact not to be taken lightly. The story gets to the point quickly. Amnon (the firstborn and so heir, cf. 3:3) loves her. He desires her passionately, but she is not available to him. Amnon's passion collides with what is socially permitted (v. 2). This social constraint might have ended the story without any action, except for the inventive mind of Jonadab, Amnon's cunning friend (v. 3). Jonadab fashions a scheme to make Tamar available to Amnon. It is a daring scheme, because the king is made the go-between. There may be intended irony, in that David is now cast in a role like that of Uriah, to carry the message that will bring trouble. David unwittingly aids the plot development. Carlson has noticed how often the words "lie" and "lie with" are used here (as elsewhere in the succession narrative). "Lie with" bespeaks unprincipled self-indulgence, which is at the center of this plot.

13:7–22. The scheme of Jonadab works effectively. Tamar is dispatched by David and she comes to Amnon (vv. 7–8). Amnon plays his role perfectly. He craves intimacy. He wants to eat from her hand (v. 10; cf. vv. 5–6). Moreover he wants to eat from her hand in private. So far nothing is amiss. But then, abruptly (v. 11), Amnon invokes the powerful, dangerous word “lie with me” (*šakab*). Jonadab’s plot only assured Amnon of a private interview with Tamar. Now Amnon is on his own and must be explicit with Tamar about his intentions.

Tamar’s response (vv. 12–13) is shrewd and discerning (cf. Tribble, pp. 37–63). She resists Amnon’s advance on a variety of grounds, which function literarily as a massive indictment of Amnon. Tamar’s implicit indictment of Amnon may also spill over against David’s earlier act of lust. Amnon proposes a “folly not done in Israel.” Such a “thing” may be done among the Canaanites, who are not people of the torah. Tamar’s resistance then becomes more practical. Tamar would have to live with the shame. Amnon would be exposed for all time to come as a fool. The cost for both is enormous and long-lasting. The proposed action is wrong. It is also unwise. Finally, Tamar suggests Amnon need not be so devious. The king understands about lust and desire. He would permit the relationship.

Tamar’s suggestion is not given a chance. Amnon “forces” her (v. 14). The term “force” (*innah*) is variously translated as oppress, humiliate. It reflects more than an act of sexual exploitation. The rape is a power act of the strong against the weak. Tamar is helpless before Amnon’s unbridled passion. Amnon lies (*šakab*) with her. Jonadab’s scheme works. David has unwittingly aided Amnon. Tamar is violated. Amnon is satisfied. It is all so quick. The rape is quick, but it will take seven years to live through the consequences of that one moment of foolish lust (cf. 13:23, 38; 14:28).

The daring affront committed by Amnon awaits resolution. Upon the conclusion of the rape scene (v. 14), the narrator engages in a remarkable psychological reflection. In verse 15, the very next words after the rape of verse 14, we meet a profound emotional reversal. There is no grammatical link between the two statements. Whatever marks the shift from desire (v. 14) to repulsion (v. 15) is unstated and unexplored. Amnon has been satisfied. Not only his sexual lust is satisfied, but also his powerful capacity to have what was not rightly his. Now he quickly loses interest in Tamar. What is marked as love (v. 1) was a passing desire, now completely spent. He now hates Tamar with a great hatred. Amnon feels no lingering

attraction, no desire for continued intimacy, nothing that might remotely be called love. Amnon abhors Tamar, perhaps reflects on what he has done, and only wants her gone (v. 15).

As in verse 12, Tamar is articulate, thoughtful, and sensible. In his hate as in his lust, Amnon is undisciplined and irrational. By contrast Tamar has both a sense of moral propriety and a sense of her interests. As she was not taken in by his desire, so she is not immobilized by his hate. She resists, thinking with him about the cost of his expulsion of her. As in verse 14, so in verse 16: “He would not listen.” Amnon is the firstborn, the heir apparent, used to his own way and not accustomed to accepting advice. Amnon will not listen. He expels Tamar (vv. 16–17). Tamar is a highly visible person in the court (v. 18). When she leaves the presence of Amnon, she changes her dress and appearance, removing her clothes which mark her as a virgin (v. 19). Thus she makes a public gesture of humiliation, which also serves to indict Amnon. Amnon may have wished, like his father, to have his wrong covered over and hidden from public notice; Tamar, however, will not comply with such a cover-up. Because she has now made the scandalous matter visible, the other characters in the narrative must respond. They must deal with the new situation which Tamar, by her shame, has made visible.

Abruptly Absalom, who now emerges as the central character in the story, appears as Tamar’s vindicator. Absalom’s response is first given in verses 20 and 22. Toward his sister Tamar he is caring and in solidarity. His counsel is, “Hold your peace,” stay cool—a profound understatement that we can understand only through subsequent events. One (even Tamar) might have thought Absalom was dismissing her rape as unimportant. As it turns out, however, Absalom intends to relieve Tamar of the burden of rage and resentment. Absalom assures his sister he will carry her wrong in his heart. As the narrative makes clear, Absalom does indeed carry the humiliation of his sister until he can work revenge for her.

Absalom’s other response is toward Amnon (v. 22). Toward his brother he enacts an excommunication. He refuses to speak to his brother. Nicely sandwiched between Absalom’s two responses to Tamar and to Amnon is the response of David to Amnon’s affront (v. 21). David’s response is noticeably and dramatically terse. David is “very angry.” We are not told at whom. That is all. David says nothing. He does nothing. The narrative knows that David himself is so compromised by his own past action he can

do nothing. Indeed, Amnon's affront is modest compared to David's earlier action concerning Uriah. We do not yet know what future David's anger may have. Thus far we have high drama, but it is all prelude. Only now do we come to the plot that concerns the narrator.

13:23–33. Time has passed (v. 23). Two years of humiliation for Tamar, two years of anger for David, two years of brooding vengeance for Absalom. Justice against Amnon need not be swift, but it must be sure. Absalom must wait for the right time. Absalom proposes that the king and his whole company go to the sheepshearing, perhaps to check on property and production. We do not know if Absalom's proposal is part of a grand stratagem or not. It could be that the opportunity against Amnon only emerges late in the process. David will not accompany the entourage, however (v. 25). The king thinks Amnon's going is odd but, in the end, permits him to go with Absalom.

The journey is arranged. After two years of resentful brooding and careful planning, Absalom sees his chance. He instructs his servants, much as David commanded Joab in chapter 11 (v. 28). Absalom does not explain. His men are deeply loyal and ready to obey. Perhaps the servants of Absalom remember the Tamar affair and for that reason understand Absalom's order. Or perhaps Absalom's instruction to kill Amnon comes under the general rubric of court jealousy. We do not know what the servants thought. We only know they were unquestioningly loyal to Absalom. They act immediately and decisively (v. 29). In the aftermath of the killing, there is panic and chaos, for the other princes fear a bloodbath. In their fear, all members of the royal party who might be endangered flee.

The rape of Tamar has been avenged. In the process the way has been opened for Absalom to ascend the throne. We know from 3:3 that Amnon had priority over Absalom in line for the throne. Absalom could not hope for the throne until Amnon is eliminated. Absalom thus has powerful ulterior motives for his intense solidarity with Tamar against Amnon. Indeed, Tamar may have been only the excuse Absalom needed for his assault.

Royal news travels very fast, but it also travels in distorted form. The speedy, inaccurate report reaches David quickly: Absalom has killed everyone (v. 30). David believes the news and is beside himself. He knew his family was troubled but he had no idea how severely. He imagines the

killing of all his dynastic prospects for the future. Nathan had destined a sword as David's future (12:10), but David had no inkling that the swath of the sword would be so wide. David enters into public grief in response to the report of the deaths (v. 31).

In a wondrous turn of the narrative, Jonadab speaks to David again (vv. 32–33). The first time Jonadab urged David to “help” Amnon (vv. 3–5). This time Jonadab's function is to interpret the intent of Absalom to David. We have no clue that Absalom confided in Jonadab. Jonadab had, so far as we know, no data from Absalom, only shrewd discernment. Jonadab reassures David. Absalom has no cause to kill all the king's sons. This act of killing is derived from the events of two years ago, from Amnon's rape of Tamar. Absalom wanted only revenge against Amnon and envisioned no other killing. The conclusion: “Amnon alone is dead” (v. 33). Jonadab says no more, but the narrative makes its point. Vengeance is accomplished. Absalom has avenged Tamar. Absalom may be too aggressive and brutal, but one can understand why he acts as he does. The king has sensed that this is not a wild, undisciplined killing. It is not an act against the royal order.

13:34–39. Absalom did not wait to see the response to his deed. He knew he was in jeopardy. He did not know if Amnon had associates who would seek revenge against him. Nor did he know if his action would be misconstrued (as it almost was), so that David would pursue him. He did not wait, but fled. The narrative is emphatic, saying three times, “Absalom fled” (vv. 34, 37, 38). The first statement stands by itself (v. 34). The remainder of verses 34–36 concerns the grieving royal assemblage in Jerusalem. The royal entourage came back to the city, perhaps bringing the body of Amnon. Jonadab is at the king's side to confirm his earlier conclusion. It was only Amnon whom Absalom wanted to kill. Amnon was the crown prince, however: firstborn, heir. David weeps. He thought earlier he had to weep for all his sons (v. 31). Now, better informed, he weeps only for Amnon. His is nonetheless a vigorous grief (v. 36).

Absalom fled (v. 37). David mourned (v. 37). The language is nicely ambiguous. He mourned “his son.” Which son is he weeping for, the dead Amnon or the banished Absalom? We are not told. The narrator does not explain. Most likely David does not know. The denseness of the king's loss is so thick he cannot sort it out.

Three years is a long time (v. 39). David is alone without Amnon and without Absalom. By that time David has finished his mourning for Amnon, but Absalom was as absent as Amnon. David yearned for Absalom (v. 39). We might wonder that this impulsive king did not simply summon Absalom or go to him. But protocol, or perhaps the narrative plot, precludes such a simple resolution. For all his desire of Absalom, this handsome son is still a murderer, killer of the crown prince. Absalom cannot be too easily or simply welcomed home; there must be a waiting. The waiting David now does is not as costly for him, though, as it is for Absalom. Three years is a long time for a son to be in exile.

II Samuel 14:1–20

The action of chapter 14 is set three years after that of chapter 13 (13:38). The time span between the two chapters is the time between Absalom's flight away from Jerusalem (13:34, 37) and his return to the city (14:23–24). At the moment of his flight, it is not known if there will be a return at all. Even after three years, even when circumstances are more favorable, it is still not known and far from certain that there will be a return. The story turns on Joab (v. 1). When something needs to be done, both David and the narrator know to call on Joab. Joab takes an initiative to restore Absalom. Joab's initiative comes neither out of cooperation with Absalom nor from attraction to him. Joab's act is rather for David's sake.

14:1–7. Joab perceives in verse 1 what we know from 13:39. David's heart was "upon Absalom." Joab discerned more than David had said and so he acted. It took an enormous ruse on Joab's part to permit the king to do what the king wanted to do anyway. Kings are proud, stubborn people; they do not easily back down.

The scheme to persuade David involves an unnamed "wise woman" (v. 2). Jonadab has been "wise" (13:3), but the woman is more so. Perhaps "wise" means one who is able to discern, articulate, and practice life outside the categories of bureaucratic perception, the capacity to see connections and hidden forces that are not visible in conventional modes of administrative thought. Royal figures are geared to common sense. The woman has the capacity to act out life in an entirely different scenario. The king will be invited to her "theater" to perceive life differently (not unlike

the parable of Nathan, but on a more ambitious, more dangerous scale). Life does not need always to be perceived in one way. Life can be perceived differently and, when perceived differently, it can be acted out in new ways. Joab devises a means to authorize David to act differently.

The woman comes to David with great deference (v. 4). She recites a make-believe drama of life, but a thoroughly credible one. It concerns her two imagined sons, but it could have been David's unimaginable sons, or Cain and Abel, or any two siblings ready to kill. As things go with brothers, one killed the other. The brother-killer is sought by the family. The woman speaks in the persuasive, pathos-filled (albeit pretending) voice of a mother. The one who has killed is still her son. His violent act has not changed that elemental relationship. The woman seeks her son, not as a killer but as her son. He is all she has, and she wants him home. She yearns for her son and wants, beyond the fear and vengeance of the family, to have her son, her only son, restored to her. The anguish and yearning of the mother are powerful and thick.

14:8–11. The interaction between the king, who is moved to act, and the woman, who grovels in deference and gratitude, is portrayed. Finally, the king yields (v. 11). It is a remarkable, playful scene, for the responses of the woman are calculated to make the king aware of his own situation and to evoke in him a new response toward Absalom. As the woman leads the king through her strategy of persuasion, each response of the king is more solemn and serious and more compelling for his own situation. There is a wonderful incongruity between his speech and hers. The woman speaks always with a double agenda in mind; the king has failed to perceive her second agenda, which is in fact his own situation. The king, however, is unaware of the incongruity of their exchanges, and so the speech of the woman works. The woman promises that if the king is mocked for his softness it will be her fault (v. 9). She pleads that the cycle of vengeance be stopped for the sake of her son (v. 11).

In answer, the king promises to protect the woman from those who want vengeance (v. 10). Finally the king gives his verdict: The son will be safe. "Not a hair will fall to the ground" (v. 11). The king will guarantee the son's safety. This is the same language the people used to rescue Jonathan (I Sam. 14:45): "Not one hair ... shall fall to the ground."

This is also the language of the Heidelberg Catechism in describing the way the gospel protects all who are guilty, but who are kept safe by the protective intervention of the king:

Question 1: What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

Answer: That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven *not a hair can fall from my head*; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation [emphasis added].

Imagine, the protection of every hair on the head by a royal father who is utterly attentive and utterly powerful. In the case of Absalom, such a promise takes an additional dramatic force, because he had so much hair (v. 26; but cf. 18:9–10).

The king will stop the vengeance. When the cycle of vengeance is broken, homecoming is possible. David is a fierce man. He would not knowingly compromise vengeance. He has here compromised, however, because for an instant the woman has permitted him to perceive life in an alternative way. Vengeance is never broken until life is discerned differently.

14:12–14. The point has now been made by the woman, much as Nathan's parable established its point by its own artistic power. When the "killer" is acknowledged to be a beloved son, vengeance can be overcome. Having made the point, the woman must still help the king to see the practical, immediate implication of the preceding drama. Verses 13–14 attempt to help the king see the connection of the woman's conversation to his own situation. The exact meaning of these verses is obscure, but they seem to urge David, in his own case, with his own banished son, to bring Absalom home. The woman wants David to appropriate for himself the powerful truth of the imaginative scenario of the two brothers. It is outrageous to keep a son away when you want him home. Yet the king has done this very thing with his own banished son (v. 13).

Verse 14 appears to affirm two things. First, everyone dies. Amnon has died and no one can bring him back to life (cf. 12:23). Second, God will give life to those who bring the outcasts home. These two enigmatic, artistically expressed propositions suggest that Amnon is gone and must be relinquished, but David has a chance for a saving act toward Absalom. The

wise woman wants to free David from two mistaken notions, mistakes that come from his rage, resentment, and pride. David has fallen into the trap of thinking that something more must be done for Amnon; the woman counters that Amnon has only died as we all must, and that reality should not control David's life. Second, David seems to think there is virtue in keeping a grudge alive; the woman counters with the assertion that real virtue is not in keeping the banished one away but in bringing him home. On the hard, hurtful points of pride in relationships, the woman requires David, out of the preceding lesson which David has embraced, to think differently about his own life and conduct.

14:15–17. These verses are either displaced and belong after verse 7 (so McCarter 1984) or they are a dramatic move by the woman, who does not directly confront the king with his own case any longer but retreats into the safer arena of her imagined tale. The woman explains now in retrospect why she has brought her burdened situation to the king. She throws herself on the mercy of the king because she has nowhere else to turn. The king is her court of last resort, her last refuge from the thirst for vengeance all around her. She expresses great confidence in the protective power of the king. The king's role is not to execute vengeance but to be a bulwark against unwise and unnecessary vengeance. The woman ends her appeal by reminding the king of how wise he is to discern good and evil. This extravagant speech, which seeks to motivate the king by flattery, makes the argument that true wisdom consists in moving beyond vengeance to forgiveness.

In the interplay of verses 5–7, 13–14, and 15–17, the woman has shrewdly moved back and forth between her imagined world and the real world of David. The persuasive argument is in the imagined scenario that David is then urged to apply to his own case. The application is more subtle and less direct than in the case of Nathan's parable. The point is clear, however. David need not be an accomplice among those who keep Absalom exiled because of the yearning for vengeance.

14:18–20. David slowly, finally, catches on. He now sees the elaborate plot enacted to seduce him into a new gesture. He recognizes the hand of Joab in the seduction (v. 19). There is no threat in David's word about Joab. Perhaps David's acknowledgment of Joab is more like amazement and

gratitude, that Joab had discerned so well and had taken such care. Perhaps David wants to say in relief and grateful disbelief, “That Joab!”

The woman is direct and without evasion. Yes, it was Joab. He did it “in order to change the course of affairs” (v. 20). He did all this to move the king to act. The woman is straightforward, but she will not completely abandon her wily ways. Finally, in verse 20*b*, resorting to her guile-filled character, she reminds David of his gift of wisdom and his responsibility to rise above mean revenge in his action. If the king is wise, he will not decide Absalom’s case on routine judicial grounds. He will know more than quid pro quo. Retribution will keep Absalom away from his father forever, but such uncaring retribution is not what life is about. Life is about breaking the cycle of fear and resentment and welcoming him home, denying blood to the thirsty ones. The woman has done her work, so that the awareness now dawning can be David’s own recognition.

II Samuel 14:21–33

14:21–24. David is convinced. He acts. He addresses Joab. He announces his decision to bring his son home. He only half acknowledges that he is giving in to Joab. In his conversation with Joab, David never alludes to the strategy of the woman. David’s word seems a grudging capitulation to Joab’s better wisdom. The decree of verse 21 sounds like a sigh of relief. The father will act as a father wants, against the hard demands of the royal office. Kings are in the business of exact repayment, but fathers cannot live that way forever. Joab knew that, long before David acknowledged it.

Joab is responsive and obedient (vv. 22–23). He defers to David and finds David’s decision to restore Absalom a welcome one. Joab can now subtly acknowledge that the restoration of Absalom is not only a good idea but his idea. David does not acknowledge to Joab that he knows this, nor that he has learned it from the woman (vv. 19–20). Joab has the satisfaction of being right and prevailing. He has won in this trial over David’s heart and David’s inclination. Joab wisely does not press the point. A great deal is left unsaid between the two men. Both men know that Joab has been right. David admits nothing but, in fact, acts according to the expectations of Joab. David acts out of the desire of his heart, which Joab had first discerned.

Then, when Joab thinks the matter is settled, David has a second troubled thought (v. 24). Absalom can come home. He can come to the city and to his own house. But he cannot come home to me! Absalom is still, for practical purposes, excommunicated, still removed from the sphere of power. David proposes an arrangement that will be untenable for both father and son. The son is here, but he is not here. David cannot quite let his longing heart have its way over his royal fierceness. Absalom is put into an impossible holding pattern.

14:25–27. The narrator pauses in the action to tell us about Absalom: He is handsome, and his hair bespeaks his power and virility (vv. 25–26). We are given a hint as to why Absalom is so popular and why he is so feared by David. Since the failure of Saul, Israel has been warned about relying on physical appearance, so as not to be seduced with media impressions when seeking a leader (cf. I Sam. 16:7). When David appeared on the scene, however, the narrative could not resist reporting David's attractiveness (I Sam. 16:12). It is the same now with Absalom. Physical appearance should not count. But Absalom is so attractive and so compelling. Absalom is a royal son that looks and acts like a king. David might have been attractive, but now David is older. Absalom is now the young man who makes Israel forget the David that used to be.

Absalom is indeed a threat to David. He will steal the hearts of Israel (15:6), and David is helpless before his young, handsome, ambitious son. Even this narrator who is so committed to David cannot help but notice Absalom's appearance and comment on it. From top to bottom Absalom is perfect, fully qualified. His abundant hair bespeaks his obvious virility. He is fertile and has an attractive family. This is the person David has placed in limbo. Perhaps David will not see him, but everyone else notices him.

14:28–33. Reconciliation between father and son is slow, painful, and costly. It cannot be rushed, as Joab knew. But who would have expected two more years of waiting (v. 28)! Just as reconciliation cannot be rushed, it also cannot be put off forever. Once again Joab is a catalyst for the necessary action by David. Joab is the only one who has a chance to move David beyond himself. Joab is the only one who has the access and the courage to speak frankly to David. For Absalom, everything depends on Joab.

Absalom tries to make contact with Joab. He sends for Joab; he sends again. Joab, however, will not return Absalom's calls (v. 29). Joab is utterly loyal to David. If David will not see Absalom, neither will Joab. Finally, in desperation, Absalom, in a Samson-like trick, orders his servants to burn Joab's field (v. 30; cf. Judg. 15:4–8). When Joab finally asks why Absalom had burned his field, Absalom says, "To get your attention" (v. 32). Joab does not even protest. He understands the ways of power. What is a field when we are discussing banishment and restoration?

Absalom has now secured the attention of Joab, who is his only point of entry to David. Absalom is still an outsider, kept at arm's length by his father. Absalom finds this in-limbo situation intolerable. Filled with courage and ready to risk, he forces the issue with the king, insisting to Joab that the king either welcome him home with a full pardon or kill him (v. 32). Absalom will no longer accept an in-between status, neither welcomed nor banished. He has found his half-welcome home by his father worse than exile and, he concludes, worse than death.

Joab is convinced by Absalom; he goes to the king with the ultimatum (v. 33). Joab receives only a few words in this text for his dangerous mission to David. He does not know how the king will respond. But Absalom's strategy is successful. He gains the audience he wanted. The meeting between father and son is leanly told in the text, but it is not any the less filled with anxiety and possibility.

None of the principals—David, Absalom, or Joab—knows for sure what kind of meeting it will be. In the end, David will determine the nature of the meeting; his responses to Absalom thus far, however, have been so unpredictable that we do not know beforehand what he will do. The meeting could be a stern, formal encounter between a demanding, uncompromising king and a guilty subject. Or it could be a meeting between a yearning father and a wayward son (cf. Luke 15:20–24). Absalom cannot presume upon David.

He enters the room, not acting like a son but like a servant (v. 33; cf. the action and speech of the "son become servant" in Luke 15:21–22). Absalom bows deeply in abasement and submission. The king responds. The narrative refers to David as "the king." He is not David, not father, only "king." As king, however, he kisses Absalom. His kiss is a formal, public act of welcome, forgiveness, and pardon. It may be an act dictated by royal protocol, but the kiss is also the act of a yearning father who has waited as

long as has the son for this moment. (See the kiss of the father in Luke 15:20.) The father kisses the son, the king welcomes the guilty servant, and life is restored! We know from the comment of 14:1 and the later grief of David (18:33—19:4) that the father cares passionately and intensely for this son.

Absalom is home! The exile is restored! The narrative has taken us on a long route for healing in this family. Tamar is now avenged. Amnon has been grieved but in this moment is forgotten. Absalom is home! All Jerusalem knows that the crown prince is now at home and restored to grace. There may indeed be matters in the royal family unresolved, wounds unhealed, losses unrecovered. Families are like that, and the family of David is no exception. But families, perhaps especially royal families, live through their public pictures. Joab could not manage more than the appearance (as also in 19:5–8). There can, however, be little doubt that this scene of welcome and restoration is a genuine one. Absalom is home! Joab is vindicated. David is satisfied.

We are ill-prepared for the next scene (15:1–6), in which Absalom has already made his next cunning move toward the throne. David has welcomed him home. David has not, however, invited Absalom to take the throne. David cares intensely for Absalom, but not at the cost of his own throne. The narrative wants to get on with Absalom and his story (chs. 15–19). There is more to tell about David and Absalom, and it will not be good.

This episode in chapters 13–14 is preliminary to the bulk of the Absalom story, but not for that reason unimportant. This story is an anguished reflection on the drama of alienation and reconciliation, on the power of vengeance, and the odd capacity to forgo vengeance. The story discloses that gestures shape reality; it demonstrates how much power gestures have, even in the face of other deep preferences.

This is the story of a royal family. Its locus in the family of David cannot be disregarded. The narrative has such power, however, because it illumines every family where there is lust and death, alienation and yearning. Would that every family has daring discerners like Joab and a wise woman who can enact an alternative. Our problem, like David's, is that we embrace a single option. We become so accustomed to a given situation that we are not attentive to the yearned-for alternatives that are possible and available in our humanness. Like the woman and Joab and Absalom, we all want and wait for an authoritative voice to assure us that in

the midst of hate and vengeance we are safe and that not one hair of our head shall fall to the ground (cf. I Kings 1:52).

Scholars are not agreed about the unity of chapters 11–19; it nevertheless seems plausible that the narrative of the rebellion of Absalom (chs. 15–19) gathers together the threads of the preceding two episodes for its own use. In chapters 11–12, Nathan announced, “I will raise up evil against you out of your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor” (12:11). We learn only later that the “neighbor” is David’s own son Absalom (16:20–22).

Moreover, the David narrative echoes accents from the earlier Saul narrative. In I Samuel 15:28, Samuel announced that the throne would be given to Saul’s “neighbor,” who in 28:17 is named as David. Now, in the David narrative, the same literary device is used. In II Samuel 12:11 David will be displaced by a “neighbor,” who in 16:20–22 is in fact Absalom. For David, as for Saul, the displacing “neighbor” is the one closest at hand. The dramatic move in the narrative from II Samuel 12:11 to 16:20–22 presents the deep and costly conflict David has with Absalom. His son would displace him in public favor and in power, as the consequence of David’s own waywardness in chapters 11–12.

As the narrative of Absalom’s rebellion builds on the drama of II Samuel 11–12, it also is rooted in the narrative of chapters 13–14. That narrative was ostensibly about Amnon and Tamar. By its end, however, Absalom is its principal character (14:28–33). The interaction about Amnon and Tamar is a context and pretext for the banishment and restoration of Absalom. Absalom’s restoration to David, we are told, was accomplished only by deception, and with grudging and resentment (14:24, 33). As we learn later, David had good reason to resist the restoration of Absalom. The son for whom David yearns (14:1) is in fact a major threat. Absalom’s restoration to Jerusalem and to political favor (14:33) leads to and permits, almost immediately, the usurpation of power and favor (15:1–6). The narrative pause between 14:33 and 15:1 is only momentary, only long enough to let us notice that Absalom is transformed from the needy suppliant welcomed home to the aggressive, ambitious heir. Absalom’s challenge to David is seemingly based in the resentment evoked in chapters 13–14 and is seemingly legitimated by Nathan’s word in 12:11. The narrative of Absalom’s rebellion that follows flows directly and ominously from the preceding accounts of chapters 11–12 and 13–14.

II Samuel 15—19

The Rebellion of Absalom

The pathos-filled narrative of David and his family reaches its dramatic center in this extended story concerning Absalom's rebellion. This extended narrative may be organized in three general sections: (1) the coup and David's flight (15:1—16:14); (2) the conflict of David and Absalom and competing strategies (16:15—18:8); and (3) the victory of David, the defeat of Absalom (18:9—19:43). It will be immediately apparent, however, that the narrative is in fact a series of loosely related encounters, each of which draws us more powerfully into the terrible drama of ruthless power and ambivalent love. In most cases the speeches and conversations are more important than the actions. The speeches and conversations invite us to "listen in" while we watch the implementation of David's destiny.

II Samuel 15:1—16:14

15:1–6. These verses provide a general characterization of Absalom. As we have seen, Absalom is young and attractive (14:25–27). He is beautiful and enormously ambitious. In this narrative, Absalom enlists his youth and attractiveness in the service of his ambition. He develops an entourage of chariots, horses, and runners, so that his every movement seems a royal procession (v. 1). One has an image of constant street parades in Jerusalem, calling attention to this prince and heir. Jerusalem is not a very big city, but big enough to be filled with royal ambition, drama, and excitement.

Absalom spends a lot of time offering himself as an alternative candidate for king (vv. 4–6), even though there is no vacancy in the office. David's vulnerability in terms of public support is apparently derived from his slack handling of judicial responsibility. The king is to dispense justice and be arbitrator of social conflict (cf. Ps. 72:1–4, 12–14; Isa. 11:3–5). Verses 4–6 give the impression that the problem in David's court is not that David was dispensing unpopular justice but that no justice at all was administered. The royal system of justice seems to have become

dysfunctional. The king failed in his role as king. We are not told why. We are only told that Absalom proposed himself as a more likely person to administer royal justice. An outsider characteristically promises to do better than the incumbent. Absalom's claim gained credibility in popular opinion. He offered himself and bad-mouthed the king. The people believed him. He "stole their hearts" (v. 6).

15:7–12. Absalom is not satisfied only to cultivate discontent. He must have known that no amount of unrest or dissatisfaction would lead to the throne unless he took direct steps. Absalom does not rush into action, though. He waits four years, time enough for his resentment to turn to courage and for popular support to grow. Absalom requests and receives permission to go worship at Hebron (vv. 7–9). Again, worship is used as a cover for political activity (cf. I Sam. 16:5). David does not doubt the motives of Absalom. David is as trusting of his son as others have always been of him.

Absalom, however, is not trustworthy but ruthless and calculating. Once he is at Hebron, he puts his coup into action. He immediately initiates his own proclamation as king (v. 10). Absalom has included in his ruthless strategy a large party from Jerusalem, who were no doubt his friends and who are implicated in his coup by their presence with him in Hebron. In addition, Absalom recruits the powerful support of Ahithophel, a high-ranking member of David's government (v. 12). The combination of popular support and the major defection of Ahithophel makes the challenge to David formidable. The narrative summarizes nicely: "The conspiracy grew strong" (v. 12). The narrative verdict on Absalom's coup is noticeably partisan. The narrative does not call Absalom's challenge a movement or an uprising but a "conspiracy." It is the same word Saul used against the David people (I Sam. 22:8, 13). The narrative reports a conspiracy against a legitimate king to whom the narrator (and we) are committed.

The shape of the conflict shocks us. We are accustomed to David as the one with the initiative. How quickly roles are changed! Now David is presented as an old establishment figure caught in his bureaucratic posturing, while the crowd has slipped up on him and taken him by surprise. Vigor now seems allied with Absalom—against David. David, however, is not yet helpless.

15:13–31. News of the uprising (conspiracy) is given to David (v. 13). Verse 13 recalls the popular verdict on Absalom in verse 6. The people are with Absalom. Absalom has the “men of Israel” with him. David has “his servants who were in Jerusalem.” The unequal match suggests a popular movement (for Absalom) versus a palace cadre (allied with David). David has the support of the old political establishment. But popular loyalty is more valuable. It is a matter of shifting allegiance and emotional embrace. It is a matter of “the heart,” and the hearts of Israel shift in their allegiance.

David must flee for his life (v. 14). His departure from Jerusalem is not a panicked retreat. It is a long-drawn-out royal process, during which a series of important meetings and conversations must be held. This narrative pattern may be intended like a passion narrative, in which David is headed for his “wilderness,” but the narrative takes time for important business to be conducted along the way. The king leaves his harem in the city (v. 16). Indeed, they must stay so that Nathan’s word can come to fruition (12:11). The impression that David’s support is a palace clique is reinforced by the mention of concubines (v. 16) and mercenaries (v. 18). David’s military strength is not in a popular militia but in a paid guard.

As David prepares to flee, he deals with a series of people: Ittai (vv. 19–23), Abiathar and Zadok (vv. 24–29), Hushai (vv. 32–37), Ziba (vv. 16:1–4), and Shimei (16:5–14). This series of meetings shows David alert, fully in charge, realistic, careful, and cunning. Absalom may indeed have underestimated his father’s capacity for survival and self-defense.

David first meets Ittai (vv. 19–23). Ittai is a foreigner. We might expect David to mistrust a newly arrived foreigner, as the Philistines mistrusted him in I Samuel 29, but there is no hint of suspicion. Rather, David is thoughtful and magnanimous, aware that the “sojourner” has only now found a place. David is reluctant to make Ittai a homeless sojourner again. While David flees for his life, he wishes for the foreigner steadfast love and faithfulness (*hesed we’emet*; v. 20). The foreigner, however, expresses passionate loyalty to and solidarity with David, promising to stay with David in every circumstance (v. 21). The promise is not unlike the promise Ruth made to Naomi (Ruth 1:16–17). David, moved and convinced by the foreigner’s words, agrees that Ittai may go with him. Indeed, David makes Ittai one of his three top commanders (cf. 18:2, 5), relying on Ittai’s oath. David will have with him only those who swear loyalty. That David must

rely on a foreigner at this time may indicate how his Israelite support has eroded.

After Ittai, David deals with two priests (vv. 24–29). This meeting points out the Davidic combination of faith and cunning and the shrewdness of the literature. It would have been normal for the priests and the ark to accompany David in his flight. The ark is the symbol of the oldest legitimacy in Israel and a source of social power (cf. 6:1–19). Yet David seems reluctant to presume upon the ark and upon God. He will not use the ark unduly. He casts himself completely upon the favor and will of God (vv. 25–26). David has no desire to manipulate God. He is prepared to entrust himself to God’s good way and to take the outcome that is willed for him. He sends the priests back to the city.

The narrator insists on one additional word from David, which is exceedingly telling: “Inform me” (v. 28). It is clear that the priests must be in the city to spy for David (cf. vv. 35–36). David is realistic enough to think his priests will be more valuable to him in Jerusalem spying than in the wilderness praying. David is neither careless nor naïve. He puts his religious functionaries to maximum strategic use.

Thus David, as rendered by the narrator, embraces at the same time pure, trusting faith and cunning strategy. How may we adjudicate the two? Is the former only a cover for the latter? Possibly, but I prefer to believe that the David of this narrative is a man of many parts, each of which must be taken seriously. Thus David is indeed thinking, planning, and scheming. That does not cancel out his enormous faith, however. He does entrust himself to God, but such trust does not entail mindlessness or resignation.

In verses 30–31 we have another juxtaposition of theological reality and political realism. The departure from the city is a time of ritual grief (v. 30; cf. v. 23). Behind the ritual is the awareness that when the king departs, reality is under threat. The weeping is thus ritual acknowledgment of political reality. David is able to participate in the grief because he does indeed regard himself as the embodiment of royal reality. David is not, however, fully preoccupied with this ritual act. He is still able to receive bulletins and intelligence reports. The defection of Ahithophel is a major blow (v. 31; cf. v. 12). David’s response to the defection of Ahithophel is a prayer (v. 31). David prays that the seemingly shrewd political advice of Ahithophel may actually become political folly. David is not afraid to be bluntly political and pragmatic with God. There is no “pure” prayer for

David, for he has his piety and his political interests well integrated. David's brief prayer against his enemy is according to the standard prayers of complaint modeled in the psalms of lament. The framers of this narrative are no doubt saturated in the politically candid prayers of the psalter. David characteristically prays in the way Israel prays in such circumstances. The narrative is crafted so that David's piety and his realism converge.

15:32–37. David next meets Hushai. Hushai is a high-ranking official on a par with Ahithophel. He is a Davidic loyalist. He comes to David with ostentatious grief, to express his solidarity with David. David's reception of Hushai follows the pattern of this series of meetings: David permitted Ittai to go with him. He sent his priests back to Jerusalem. Now David sends Hushai back as well.

David is developing his plan of defense. He meets those who are loyal and deploys them in various ways to be most useful for his general strategy. It is characteristic of the narrative mode of presentation that we are not told of David's strategy, but we watch it emerge, one item at a time. David develops a network of military and intelligence agents to outflank Absalom at every turn. The meetings and conversations reported to us are David's careful way of recruitment and deployment of those on whom his throne now depends. David makes various daring uses of his soldiers, diplomats, and priests. In the wilderness he needs soldiers. His priests and diplomats are more useful elsewhere.

David directs Hushai to defect and join Absalom's movement, to become one of Absalom's advisers. That is, David puts a plant in the high councils of Absalom. In verse 31 David had prayed that the counsel of Ahithophel should be defeated. Now David strategizes to answer that prayer himself. It will be Hushai who acts to answer David's prayer. Moreover, verses 35–36 connect the Hushai strategy with David's previous arrangement of priests. In these two moves, David has created for himself an intelligence network. Hushai is marked as "David's friend" (v. 37). He is prepared, no doubt at high risk, to obey his king.

16:1–4. After David has journeyed a little further, he meets Ziba. Ziba has been entrusted with the management of Mephibosheth's estate (cf. 9:2–11). Ziba belongs to the old Saul company. One might have expected Ziba to side with Absalom in anticipation of the overthrow of David. Indeed, Ziba

may have imagined that David would expect him to defect, and it is for that reason that Ziba brings an extravagant and ostentatious gift to David (v. 1).

David is direct. He asks Ziba why he has brought such a contribution, which is unsought and unexpected (v. 2a). There must be some motive for such generosity. Ziba is not forthcoming; his answer is no answer at all, only a statement of the obvious. The asses are for riding, the bread is for eating, the wine is for drinking (v. 2b).

Obviously the lavish gift is intended as a statement of loyalty. It is a public act of siding with David in the civil war. David's question is to determine whether this offering is from Ziba or from Mephibosheth (v. 2c). Since Ziba makes no answer concerning the motivation for the gift, David concludes the gift is from Ziba himself. This of course is the conclusion Ziba wanted David to draw. Notice how shrewdly Ziba has distanced himself from Mephibosheth without uttering a word. As we come to expect in David's meetings during his flight, this is a very careful exchange, in which more is said when less is spoken.

Because Ziba is so reticent, it is David who must bring up the awkward question, "Where is your master's son?" (v. 3). In this probing question we may note two subtleties. First, David will not utter Saul's name. It is as though David has such disdain for Saul that he cannot speak the name, or will not give Saul such audible identity. Then David deliberately drops into the conversation the phrase, "your master." He alludes to the fact that Ziba has belonged to the Saulide party, and David has ample reason to doubt Ziba's sudden loyalty. Moreover, David does not want Ziba to forget that David knows about this old loyalty, which is not eradicated by a simple assertion of new loyalty. David's question to Ziba about Mephibosheth is not about the physical location of Saul's grandson. More likely it is about Mephibosheth's political sympathies. Whose side is he on? The gifts of Ziba (gotten off Mephibosheth's land) make clear where Ziba is. The loyalty of Mephibosheth, however, is at this point not clear.

In Ziba's answer we finally get to the point. Mephibosheth is in Jerusalem. It is in Jerusalem that Saul's heir has said, according to Ziba, "Today I will recover my kingship": that is, Saul's kingship (v. 3). Mephibosheth's hope, says Ziba, is that the rebellion of Absalom will lead to the restoration of Saul's house. Perhaps a number of Saulides are temporarily allied with Absalom to get rid of David. We must remember, however, that for all the ominous threat of the statement, we have only

Ziba's word for it, a word that is not disinterested. Ziba has put the loyalty of Mephibosheth in doubt while simultaneously enhancing his own position.

David impulsively believes Ziba (v. 4). Without any investigation, David exercises his royal right to reassign land and thereby disenfranchises the old landed family of Saul. David's warrant for this abrupt act is that Mephibosheth is a traitor—solely on the basis of Ziba's word. By this daring regal act, David sends a warning to other potential defectors that they risk the loss of their land. While David is preoccupied with the threat of Absalom, he dares to take a decisive step against the enduring threat of the Saulides. David is in danger from several directions, but his nerve has not failed. David reverses the restoration of Saul's land, which he had authorized in 9:9–10, using his power to intimidate and gather loyalists to himself. David's long-standing promises to Jonathan (I Sam. 20:14–17) and to Saul (I Sam. 24:21–22) are roughly superseded by his own need for self-preservation. To be sure, David has not violated the letter of his earlier promises, but he has come very close to a violation of *hesed* against Saul's family.

16:5–14. David's final meeting as he flees Jerusalem is with Shimei, also of "the house of Saul" (v. 5). This episode follows appropriately after the Ziba meeting. The Saulide party is alive and active and has a hope as durable as its memory. Its memory is long, passionate, and bitter against David.

The enduring tension with the Saulides has continued to vex David. Here that tension is explicit. David is fleeing for his life and is assaulted by this cursing renegade. The charge of Shimei is important. He condemns David as a "man of blood," specifically the blood of the house of Saul (vv. 7–8). Shimei interprets Absalom's rebellion as divine punishment for David's acts against the house of Saul. An important body of opinion in Israel maintained that David had complicity in the deaths of Saul, Ishbosheth, and Abner. Indeed, we have noted in chapters 2–4 that great care is taken by the narrator to exonerate David of such complicity, which indicates the vitality of the charge. Whether David was implicated or not, David's cunning ways made it easy for Saulides to suspect him. They may make it possible for us to imagine that, behind the carefully wrought pro-David account of II Samuel, there are grounds for the charge. We do not know and must be content without any easy certitude of David's innocence.

Shimei's charge evokes the rage of Abishai, one of David's most troublesome loyalists. The appearance of the hostile Saulide allows us another glimpse of the sons of Zeruiah at their most zealous. As they have eliminated Abner, now Abishai is ready to kill Shimei and stop the threat (v. 9). Abishai is always ready for a killing, and it is even better if the killing is in the service of David.

Such a killing is of course all that David needs just now! He has all he can handle with Absalom. He does not need a provocation to bring the Saulides out of the woodwork to join Absalom, if indeed they have not already done so.

David's response to Abishai (vv. 10–12) again shows David's capacity to hold together political realism and genuine piety. The realism is that the sons of Zeruiah must not commit a provocative act. The piety is that David must take his chances with the curse of Shimei, believing that even the curse is subject to the rule of Yahweh. Yahweh's powerful will can override the curse.

In his piety David observes that Shimei may be authorized by Yahweh. Notice that David does not express his own innocence. He states only his submissiveness to Yahweh. David is prepared to let the cursing go unanswered, not as an admission of guilt but as an act of faith.

In his answer to Shimei, David does not deny the charges. Nor does he presume on God. David only allows for the prospect that God will not heed the curse but will look on David in his need (v. 12). To a dangerous political threat from a Saulide, David will not directly engage the Saulide but makes a theological response, casting himself on the mercy of Yahweh (cf. 24:14). Who knows? Yahweh may be gracious not only in spite of the cursing but because of it. David turns to Yahweh, but even here he does not insist. He only waits in acknowledgment and trust. Yahweh may redress the cursing by treating David well. David's response may be cunning politics, for he does not want to push the Saulides into the arms of Absalom. It may also be that David has no real option in his response to Shimei, because a curse is a serious and weighty matter. Aside from such political nuances, however, David's response is cast in the language of high, noble, and trusting faith. David is presented as capable of trust and submissiveness. He relies on God's grace in the midst of enormous danger.

David arrives at the Jordan, the very edge of administered land, under a barrage of unanswered curses and unrefuted charges (v. 14). He has

withdrawn under assault from his ordered place. His royal claim is in deep jeopardy.

This journey to the Jordan has been a long, regal one in which David has had to make a series of decisions about the course of his future. The farther away from Jerusalem he has traveled, the more his royal claim is diminished. In all the long narrative of 15:13—16:14, Absalom has been absent. The narrative is not interested in Absalom. Its single interest is David, who is portrayed as a cunning strategist with all his wits about him, and as a devoted subject of Yahweh who willingly yields to God's grace. David arrives at the end of his journey "weary" (16:14; cf. John 4:6). He is weary and the battle has not yet begun. The narrator wants us to watch while David's destiny (and Israel's) is enacted. There are forces larger than David at work. He will not retreat in the face of danger. David is a man of courage whose faith and cunning lead him to continue to have freedom in the face of enormous adversity.

II Samuel 16:15—18:8

Absalom has waited offstage while David was given time to organize his part of the drama. David has engaged in high faith and shrewd planning. Now the scene shifts to the camp of Absalom. David is on the run. Absalom holds the initiative. We are made privy to a crucial strategy meeting. This middle section of the narrative concerning the conflict and competing strategies (16:15—18:8) is in two principal parts, the debate between Ahithophel and Hushai (16:20—17:23) and the actual military confrontation (17:24—18:8). The two parts have an odd and strained relation to each other. We will begin with the debate about strategy, featuring Hushai and Ahithophel. This section begins with the arrival of the two advisers in the camp of Absalom (16:15–16) and ends with the suicide of the defeated, humiliated Ahithophel (17:23). This account is laden with a weighty theological undercurrent.

16:15–19. Absalom is now in Jerusalem. He occupies the royal palace. Jerusalem thus seems to have become Absalom's city. All that remains for David in Jerusalem, in addition to his concubines (15:16), are his two priests, Zadok and Abiathar, their two sons (15:27–29), and Hushai (15:37). Hushai must now establish his credibility with Absalom. He must

demonstrate to Absalom that he is as reliable as defector as is Ahithophel. Hushai is “David’s friend” and plant (15:37), but he must persuade Absalom otherwise. He is exceedingly persuasive.

Hushai’s initial greeting to Absalom is wondrously ambiguous: “Long live the king!” (v. 16). Notice that the king is not named. Absalom and his men hear the words as an acknowledgment of Absalom, but the words permit a hidden loyalty to David, who is the real king. Hushai is a master of deception and double-talk, but of such are the affairs of state. As a test of Hushai, Absalom reprimands him for his betrayal of David. He inquires about Hushai’s capacity for *hesed* and refers to David as Hushai’s friend (v. 18). Again, Hushai’s response is ambiguous, for he asserts that he will be with the “chosen one”; again the statement can be taken either way, for Absalom or for David. Finally (v. 19), Hushai’s words more openly speak of service to the son instead of the father. His closing words to Absalom are “I will serve you” (v. 19). Hushai’s speech moves slowly, reluctantly, even grudgingly to this conclusion. We know it to be a dishonest speech authorized by David; everything depends on Absalom’s not knowing what we know.

16:20–23. There is a debate in the war council. In turn we listen to the proposal of Ahithophel, a trusted defector (16:21—17:3), and that of Hushai, who has now gained unwarranted credibility with Absalom (17:7–13). Ahithophel intends to give Absalom sound advice. His counsel is in two parts. First, seize the king’s concubines (vv. 20–23). Act like a king! Go public with the rebellion. If one seizes the accouterments of office, there will be public support. Those who are weary of David will be galvanized into resistance. Ahithophel’s advice is ruthless and daring but also realistic. He understands that the seizure of the symbols of power is a blatant, risky gesture, but likely to gain support from the people. Ahithophel does not seem at all troubled by the fact that these symbols of power are deeply offensive to the old traditionalists in Israel.

Ahithophel’s advice can be taken at face value, as the shrewd proposal of one who knows how public power is manipulated. We will not fully understand his proposal, however, unless we also remember the ominous threat of Nathan to David (12:11). Nathan had anticipated the loss of the wives “in the sight of the sun” as decisive for losing power. Now Ahithophel’s advice is enacted “in the sight of all Israel,” where all can see

the shift of power. Ahithophel's advice unwittingly fulfills the threat of Nathan. Absalom's defiance and challenge to David may be an act of raw, daring politics; it is at the same time, however, the narrative makes clear, an implementation of Yahweh's decree given long before Absalom and Ahithophel are present in the narrative. The coup of Absalom, informed by the wisdom of Ahithophel, implements Yahweh's awesome judgment voiced by Nathan.

The seizure of the concubines by Absalom as a usurpation of power closely parallels the act of Abner against Ishbosheth (3:7–10). Abner's act was a harbinger of the end of Ishbosheth's power. In the same way, Absalom's act, according to both the counsel of Ahithophel and the anticipation of Nathan, is a harbinger of the end of David's throne. The single gesture of seizing the concubines thus is freighted with profound implications for David and for Israel's public life. (See 20:3 on David's later decision to distance himself from the recovered concubines and all that they symbolize.)

17:1–4. Ahithophel's second proposal concerns military strategy. Ahithophel proposes that he himself should lead a quick strike force. He is willing to take the risk himself and not put Absalom personally at risk. He is aware that David is at present exhausted and vulnerable. Moreover, Ahithophel is politically sensitive. He does not want to alienate the populace or swing them over to David's side. Thus he proposes, with his simple, swift strategy, to kill "the king only ... only one man" (vv. 2–3). The populace will be unhurt and will rally to the new king. The plan is effective, simple, intelligent. It eliminates David and does not escalate social conflict. No wonder it pleases Absalom and his elders (v. 4). Ahithophel is a genuine and effective defector.

17:5–14. Before responding to Ahithophel's plan, Absalom summons Hushai. What rich irony! Absalom welcomes advice from the one who in fact is against him and who intends to destroy him. Hushai begins with a dismissal of the plan of Ahithophel (vv. 7–10). That plan is "not good" (v. 7). Again Hushai shows himself the master of double-talk. The plan of Ahithophel may in fact be "good" for Absalom, but it surely is "not good" for David. In eloquent and elaborate words, Hushai explains (falsely) why the first plan will not work. Ahithophel has underestimated David. David

and his men are dangerous and brave. David will be hard to find. He is too smart to be exposed easily. If David is found, there will be a terrific fight. Absalom's followers will hear the noise and conclude that David has killed their own, and they will retreat in panic.

By his powerful rhetoric, Hushai argues that Ahithophel is unrealistic about David. In the bargain Hushai (and the narrator) has managed to sound a great tribute to David in the enemy camp. All of Israel has long known that David is a mighty and dread warrior, and Hushai draws on that memory here (cf. I Sam. 18:7). Hushai does not need to say anything for or against Absalom's own prowess. It is beyond imagining that Absalom could possibly be in the same league as the mighty warrior, David. In his posture as Absalom's adviser, Hushai cleverly paints a picture that elevates David and diminishes Absalom.

Having dismissed the plan of Ahithophel, Hushai proposes his own alternative (vv. 11–13). Hushai proposes to take time to recruit an enormous army from all over Israel, which would be led by Absalom himself (v. 11). He hopes to put Absalom personally at risk. He proposes a general slaughter so that “not one will be left” (v. 12). In fact Hushai proposes such a grand and deliberate strategy by Absalom in order to give David some much-needed time. Hushai masks his deception behind the rhetoric of hyperbole and fanciful unreality and reaches a height of rhetoric by proposing to drag by ropes into the sea any city in which David might seek refuge (v. 13).

The contrast could not be more clear: the simple, quick plan of Ahithophel versus the slow, grandiose strategy of Hushai. Common sense would dictate embracing the former. We have learned recently ourselves, however, that grand strategies like mining harbors, fencing whole countries, and defoliating whole forests have a certain mesmerizing attraction in wartime. It is possible for otherwise sober people to embrace war strategies that are as remote from reality as the plan of Hushai. Our own history tells us that war councils are not simply forums of reason but struggles between massive egos, partisan interests, and much fantasy. So it is here.

The decision between these two options is articulated in verse 14. The response of Absalom and “all the men of Israel” is that the counsel of Hushai (remote from reality as it is) is “better than” the counsel of Ahithophel. We were told in 16:23 that Ahithophel's advice was esteemed

as “the word of God” and in 17:4 his counsel was “right.” Now Hushai’s advice is better and Absalom resolves to follow it (17:14).

How could that be? How could it happen that the simple, swift, limited action proposed by Ahithophel is not seen to be the superior plan? Hushai is playing a high-risk game with his outrageous rhetoric and his fantasy. The brazenness of his rhetoric would lead us to think he had no chance. But he wins!

In one of the key verses of Samuel, the narrator tells us immediately why Hushai prevails: “For the LORD had ordained (*šiwwah*) to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel [and] bring evil upon Absalom” (v. 14*b*). The choice is made, not because of clever deception but because God has commanded it. The die was cast in the providence of God before the deliberation took place in Jerusalem. God is utterly partisan to David. In spite of good advice, Absalom has never had a chance against David. This is an extraordinary statement in the midst of the narrative, whereby Israel’s odd history with David is shown to be more than a process of power, reason, and speech.

The historical process has within it this hidden Agent who works another will, and that will is in the service of David’s well-being. David prayed that the counsel of Ahithophel should be rejected (15:31). In 17:14, David’s prayer is answered and the advice of Ahithophel is defeated. The theological movement from the prayer of 15:31 to the answer of 17:14 is clear, even if hidden. What is hidden theologically is visible politically.

It is Hushai who effects the answer to the prayer. It is Hushai who secures the defeat of Ahithophel. Hushai has appeared to us in the narrative as an agent of David’s cunning, and he is that. When placed dramatically between the prayer and its answer, however, it is clear that Hushai is more than the agent of David. He is in fact the agent of Yahweh, whereby prayer is answered. Hushai and David of course do not know this, and the narrative does not make this explicit. It is unmistakable, nonetheless, that Hushai is presented in the narrative as being in the service of a purpose larger than that known by David. The story has a larger subject than the strategies of David. Hushai serves David faithfully and imaginatively. In the end, Hushai also serves the less visible and finally triumphant purpose of Yahweh.

Second Samuel 17:14 and the narrative organized around it invite reflection on the character of the historical process. We face two temptations in our attempt to understand the historical process as discerned

here. Our first and most powerful temptation is to read Israel's history in terms of technical reason and to explain what happens in positivistic categories. Thus we may only attend to the factors of human power and human cunning. When we discover that such rational categories are not adequate for the material, we are inclined to a second temptation: to react against such positivism with a supernaturalism which God acts visibly and directly. But neither positivism nor reactive supernaturalism adequately presents the story.

The narrative proposes a third reading of human experience that is neither as flattened as positivism, which reduces history to human technique, nor as romantic as supernaturalism, which makes God's presence too visible and direct. Rather, insists the narrative, there are the hidden, powerful purposes from God that operate through Hushai, but they are not dependent on him or on any other human agent, because in the end the outcome was "commanded." Such a view of the historical process, alien to our modernity, can only be articulated by way of narrative, which allows for the hiddenness. That is why our interpretation must stay very close to the lines of the narrative itself.

17:15–23. The multilayered process of this dispute among advisers is not yet finished. As we knew he would (15:35–36), Hushai reports the outcome of the war council to the priests Abiathar and Zadok. The priests in turn dispatch their sons with a report to David. Verses 17–20 provide a pause in the action to report an episode concerning the danger of this espionage and how the woman at the well nicely protects the two spies by lying for them. This is not the first time a woman has lied to save David (cf. I Sam. 19:17) or to save the people of Israel (Josh. 2:4–7). This episode does not advance the main story line. It does, however, articulate that David had a daring, effective intelligence network and had great support among the people. The report also suggests, we infer, that God's protective care watched over the Davidic enterprise. On all these counts, David should not be underestimated, as he was by Absalom.

The report of verses 21–22 adds a complication to the narrative. Though we have been told that the advice of Hushai prevailed in the councils of Absalom, the report given to David concerns the counsel of Ahithophel. The report to David and the response of David (who flees) proceed as if to escape the plan of Ahithophel.

One gains the impression that the actual conflict of the war proceeds without reference to the great debate by the advisers of Absalom. Perhaps there is some redactional inconsistency in the narrative. What matters for the narrator in the end, however, is not the particular conduct of the war. What matters is that Yahweh will look after David. Victory is not given to the quick or to the strong but to the chosen (cf. Prov. 21:30–31). For the narrator, everything is subsumed under the dramatic assertion of Yahweh's pro-Davidic governance of the war and of the life of Israel.

This complicated episode ends with a sad outcome (v. 23). In almost any governmental system, when top leaders lose, they resign to save face and honor. But Ahithophel is left neither face nor honor. He has been defeated by a traitor. He has risked everything in his defection and now he has been dismissed. His risk has yielded him nothing. He ends in ignoble suicide. He could not have known that he was defeated by Yahweh. The verse is an ominous warning: David will have his way because Yahweh will guarantee David. It is a high risk to oppose David. Israel must not defect from David. Hushai is vindicated as a man who did keep *hesed* with David (16:17).

17:24–29. The narrative now moves from extended preparations to the actual confrontation. In contrast to the preceding narrative of preparation and negotiation, the account of battle is terse and makes no theological allusions. Finally the battle must be fought. Now power, bravery, and strategy are all that count.

Each side is cited once more as preparation is made. Absalom chooses Amasa to lead his troops (v. 25). Absalom had to find someone to match Joab, who remained loyal to David (8:5). Absalom stayed in the family of Joab with his choice, for Amasa is Joab's nephew.

David receives one more gesture of support and loyalty, from Shobi, Machir, and Barzillai (vv. 27–29). David's army is dependent for maintenance on the support of people along the way. These three men no doubt are men of substance, and therefore of social significance. Their coming to David assures David's food supply, for David is a man for whom food is marvelously available (cf. Pss. 23:5; 78:19). Their coming is also a public gesture of support from forces that are not Israelite. David enjoys great popular support, as he always has.

With the physical sustenance of David and his troops assured, the narrative returns to its focus on military action. Because the narrative is interested in David and not in Absalom, we learn only about David's military organization and strategy. Whereas Absalom has only one commander, David has a refined system. His three commanders are Joab, Abishai (the fierce, loyal sons of Zeruiah), and Ittai, who has freshly sworn allegiance to David (15:21). David seems to have an enormous force. It is deployed carefully in three units. David's strategy would seem to put Absalom to great disadvantage. David has come a very long way from his initial encounter with the Philistine! War has become for him a great and carefully planned enterprise.

18:1–8. The laconic report of the battle suggests that David's careful strategy was successful (vv. 6–8). David defeated "the men of Israel." The battle was a great slaughter, and David was successful. The note about the "forest devouring" provides a transition to the story of the death of Absalom.

The general battle report moves from the opening deployment of troops (vv. 1–2) to the outcome (vv. 6–8). Between the deployment and the outcome, the narrative is concerned primarily with two matters that are of most interest for the narrator and warrant most attention in our interpretation.

First, there is an exchange about David's own role in the battle (vv. 3–4). David intends to go with his men into battle (v. 2) but is persuaded otherwise (v. 3). David is prepared to trust the judgment of his advisers and so he is absent from the battle and from the death of Absalom.

David is regularly critiqued by modern interpreters for staying in Jerusalem while there is a war (cf. 11:1). It is often thought that David's absence from the front is an indication of his self-indulgence. If we understand 11:1 in light of 18:3, however, we may conclude David stayed back because he is too "valuable" to risk in battle (cf. 21:17). Verses 2–4 witness to a high ideology of kingship, which was asserted by David's loyal followers and which David seems not to have resisted. Because David is too valuable to risk in battle, others will need to deal directly with the threat of Absalom's rebellion.

Second, David has only one piece of advice for his troops (v. 5). As the three commanders are about to be dismissed for action by David the

commander-in-chief, David the father addresses his troops. Up to verse 5, we have been watching David's nervy strategy, but we have been given no glimpse into David's sensibility as he struggles with a coup led by his own son. Obviously David wants the coup defeated, in order to retain his throne. Now, however, the father speaks. It is David's yearning desire that the coup be settled decisively, but without damage to his son who leads it. That is a tall and difficult order.

After his hardness and clarity, David speaks almost pleadingly to his hardened commanders. "Deal gently" (v. 5), not harshly, not cruelly, not with vengeance. In that moment the narrator perhaps wants us to remember with David that Saul went berserk when he found his own son against him (I Sam. 20:30–33). David does not go berserk, but he yearns powerfully against his obvious best interest as the king.

David's terse and seemingly simple address in verse 5 is an intensely freighted statement. Two things strike us about his statement. First, he does not name Absalom as his son, but only as "the young man." It is as though David is reticent about identifying the relationship too directly. Perhaps there is an intended distance to control the pathos. Second, it is to be done "for my sake," not for the sake of the son. The narrative is cast with attention turned completely away from Absalom to David. Even as the son of the king, the narrative has no interest in Absalom or sympathy for him. What counts is David's yearning to be a father and to have his fatherly sensitivity taken seriously. David avoids any direct expression of fatherhood and sonship. Of course the characters in the narrative (and we) are aware of this bonding of father and son (14:1). The narrative, however, offers no such words at this point. This is a commander who must have the coup smashed. In the mouth of the commander, the father speaks, but with restraint and with control. The people hear the imperative of the king, and so does Joab!

The imperative "Deal gently" is terse and not without ambivalence. We cannot be sure what this means in the mouth of the commander who is a father, on the lips of a father who is the commander. We do not know if the words are ironic or direct. As the narrative unfolds, we shall see that more than one reading is given to the command of the father-king. In that simple imperative are held together the requirements of state and the yearnings of a father. In the event itself, the king-father is removed and another, Joab, will give the reading of David's words that finally counts.

The narrator adds that “all the people heard” but does not tell us what the people thought about the king’s plea. Perhaps the people were moved by David’s pathos. Perhaps they resisted his footnote to battle as sentimental. They and we are freshly aware that David is a complex man, unembarrassed by his complexity. We become accustomed to leaders who cover their human sensitivity in order to make state policy seem more convincing. This narrator, however, does not require David to censor his fatherly anguish.

The pause about Absalom is a pregnant moment (v. 5). Then the narrator rushes on to battle (vv. 6–8). It is the people (“men of Israel”) against the palace clique (“servants of David”) (cf. 15:13–14). The killing is massive.

The extended narrative preparation for the battle (16:15—18:5) is much longer than the battle report itself (18:6–8). The two parts of the narrative of preparation seem to have little relation to each other. The long and tricky strategy session of Absalom and the inventive stratagems of David (16:20—17:23) stand in odd contrast to the actual mobilization for the confrontation (17:24—18:5). The first section is subtle and suggests that the outcome of the battle does not depend simply on human planning but on the dark, hidden work of Yahweh. By contrast, the mobilization of 17:24—18:8 is a human enterprise, centering in the pathos-filled plea of David in 18:5. Set back to back, these sections shrewdly place the invisible forces at work in juxtaposition to the real human enterprise. The narrative affirms that the hidden resolve of God and the reality of human power and pathos are deeply and inescapably intertwined. David wants “the young man” handled gently (18:5), but at the same time God has already “ordained” the shape of the battle (17:14). David is a bold initiative taker, but he is also the object of initiatives taken beyond his awareness or control.

II Samuel 18:9—19:8

We are now prepared for the resolution of the conflict between father and son. We cannot determine, however, if the final result is a victory or a defeat for David. The battle is no doubt a victory; the coup is defeated and David returns in power. Yet David returns in grief, and the grief nearly overrides the victorious power. Victory and grief, power and defeat are left in unresolved tension.

There are few narrative episodes concerning David that are more carefully wrought than this, or more poignantly expressed. The commanders of David must win, but they must “deal gently” with Absalom. The last sound in their ears is the lingering word of David: “Deal gently” (18:5).

18:9–15. These verses narrate the death of Absalom. The narrative approaches Absalom’s odd death with diffidence. The account is shaped in three scenes. The first scene tells about Absalom’s initial difficulty (v. 9). We have been prepared in verse 8 for the “devouring forest.” Now that motif is utilized for Absalom, who is caught “under the thick branches of a great oak.” The narrator is at pains to help us see specifically his danger and helplessness. Three factors in the text are worth noting. First, the entrapment of Absalom happened “by chance.” No one planned it. It is as though a great, ominous darkness surrounded Absalom; he is helpless in the face of it. No one can be blamed.

Second, the description of Absalom’s entrapment in the tree, by the hair or by the head, is given in a very difficult text. The Hebrew is obscure. That obscurity may reflect the reticence of the narrator or the inability of the tradition to express what in fact happened, because it is so dark and ominous. Absalom seems to have been caught by his marvelous hair in the tree (cf. 14:25). At the painful moment of Absalom’s failure, the tradition seems to mumble.

Third, Absalom hangs “between heaven and earth.” This phrase may be only a descriptive portrayal. It is, however, an odd phrase; it suggests the narrator is speaking of more than Absalom’s physical condition. Absalom is suspended between life and death, between the sentence of a rebel and the value of a son, between the severity of the king and the yearning of the father. He is no longer living, because he is utterly vulnerable, but he is not dead. Absalom’s moment is a marvelous moment “between” (liminal) for the narrator. The moment cannot be sustained for long. He must either live or die.

The second scene features a “certain man” (vv. 10–13). The man is unnamed; he must report to the ubiquitous Joab. The man reports to Joab that he saw Absalom suspended, but he did not touch him. Others might have reacted more cautiously to the report of the man, but not Joab! Joab is indignant. Joab cannot remember David’s pathos-filled command (v. 5), and

even if he remembered, he would not credit it. Joab is a military man. He thinks like a military man. Absalom is “the enemy.” This tough general who did not flinch from Abner (3:27) and did not blink at Uriah’s death (11:16–17) will not now go soft. Joab despairs of the cowardly help he has (v. 11). Joab would have given a reward for the death of Absalom! Joab can remember how Absalom burned his field (14:30–32). The death of Absalom is Joab’s unqualified goal, the pathos of the king notwithstanding.

The unnamed man is not intimidated. He must explain his actions in detail to Joab (vv. 12–13). He makes explicit what the reader already knows about court relations and court politics. Not even for money (so much for Joab’s reward) would the man violate David’s command. The man heard David’s words about Absalom. All the people heard. Even Joab heard (v. 12), although now he pretends otherwise. The man explains to Joab; his own situation is a catch-22: If I don’t kill him, I honor the king but displease you. But if I had killed him, you would not support me (v. 13). You would leave me twisting in the wind, not unlike Absalom, who is left hanging. The statement is not only a self-defense but a daring criticism of Joab, who really cannot be trusted.

In the third scene (vv. 14–15), Joab takes matters into his own hands. As we might expect, Joab does not bother to refute the man’s analysis. Most likely Joab can make no defense. His only response is to say, “I am wasting my time” (v. 14). The midst of a battle is no time to discuss moral implications or political niceties. Joab lives in a world of simple moral choices and decisions. He does not weigh and vacillate and second-guess. Instead, Joab does that at which he has always excelled: He acts! He kills the defenseless Absalom, and his aides help him.

Joab intentionally ignores the king’s express wish. Perhaps he can still remember David’s reassuring message to him at the death of Uriah: “Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another” (11:25). Joab indeed does not let the death of Absalom “trouble” him. How could David have known that what made Joab so useful in the death of Uriah would not be useful in the death of Absalom? To Joab, a death is a death is a death. The death of Uriah, as foreseen by Nathan (12:10), has now overtaken David in his own family. Joab is the instrument in both cases, for to him both deaths serve his king.

18:16–18. After Absalom’s death, Joab is completely in charge. He sounds a trumpet to stop the conflict (v. 16). There is no more civil war. “All Israel,” the ones supporting Absalom, flee for their lives. They risked much opposing David. Now they risk their lives before the fierceness of Joab. The body of Absalom is disposed of (v. 17). He is not excessively mourned, but the narrator does not disregard his body either (v. 18).

As we have seen elsewhere in the Samuel narrative, it is not the deed that counts but the message. The death of Absalom was accomplished swiftly. The hard part now is telling David. Joab knows, given what he has done, that he has a delicate task.

18:19–23. Ahimaaz wants to run and tell David the “good tidings” (v. 19). He is young, he is fast, and he wants David to know he has been delivered. Joab, however, will not permit Ahimaaz to go. Ahimaaz is the son of Zadok the priest, a close associate of Joab; one does not send the son of another ranking cabinet officer on a high-risk mission. The mission is risky because “the king’s son is dead” (v. 20). Joab does not say, “The king commanded otherwise” or “I killed him.” He does not need to, because those two indicting realities surround this text and will not be silent. Joab prefers to send “the Cushite,” an outsider not connected to anybody important. The Cushite is apparently unaware of the risk, because he readily accepts Joab’s commission and runs to David (v. 21).

Ahimaaz, however, is restless and determined. He is resolved, in his loyalty, to run to David. He knows the outcome of the battle and he must share it with David. The exchange between Ahimaaz and Joab is freighted and ominous, even though understated (vv. 22–23). Twice Ahimaaz says, “Come what may.” He apparently knows his resolve entails high risk. He does not know how David will respond, but he knows David will not like all the news. In a knowing but guarded response, Joab acknowledges the danger to the messenger: “You will have no reward.” Indeed, no reward but perhaps punishment. In the end, Joab gives his permission, perhaps satisfied that Ahimaaz understands the risk he assumes. Or perhaps the Cushite has sufficient head start to let Ahimaaz be safe. Or perhaps Joab is finally too exhausted to care.

18:24–30. The exchange between Joab and Ahimaaz builds the suspense of the narrative. Everything is focused on David’s reception of the news.

David waits eagerly and anxiously for the message that must come soon. The messengers are on their way. The king is safe, but his son is dead. The coup is smashed, but there has not been a “gentle dealing.” Soon the king must know.

The Cushite started first, but Ahimaaz arrives first. He is faster, more eager, more committed to the cause, more loyal to David, more impressed with the victory. He comes first and blurts out a positive summary of the war (v. 28). That is followed by a doxology to Yahweh for the victory. The mission is completed in piety. David presses beyond the summary to the specific. What of Absalom? That is all that really counts!

Ahimaaz has been so eager to run. Now his big moment has come. He knows what the king must be told. Joab had explicitly told him that “the king’s son is dead” (v. 20). Ahimaaz may not know the circumstance or the details of the death of Absalom. But he knows the essential; Absalom is dead. When, however, Ahimaaz has his chance, he turns coward. He refuses to run the risk and pretends he does not know. His bold “come what may” to Joab was fraudulent (vv. 22–23). He cannot tell the message he was so eager to carry (v. 19). Ahimaaz becomes—both to David and to the narrative—immediately irrelevant, having failed in his high resolve through fear of the rage of the wounded king. The dread of David overcomes Ahimaaz’s eagerness to obey and to please.

18:31–33. The second runner, an outsider and unconnected, arrives with the same message of good news, and he also gives praise to Yahweh (v. 31). Again David changes the subject to his son. The Cushite, unlike the cowardly Ahimaaz, is willing to answer about Absalom (v. 32). He was not privy to the king’s yearning (v. 5). He assumed, like Joab, that a war is a war. He imagines David will be glad that the leader of the coup is dead (v. 32). Again, we cannot avoid making connections with the announcement of the death of Uriah. That messenger knew he ran with good news; “Tell him Uriah the Hittite is also dead” (11:21). This messenger runs with what he too thinks is good news: “Tell him Absalom the traitor is dead.”

The messenger might expect David to answer again, “Do not let this trouble you, that’s the way it is in war” (11:25). Or we might expect David to kill the messenger, as he also has done before (1:15–16). David, however, does not dismiss in indifference or kill in rage. He ignores the messenger as he ignores the news of victory. In this moment the war is irrelevant. What

counts is only Absalom, and he is dead. The one to be treated “gently” is dead. David asks for no details. He does not seek to locate fault. He does not ask how it happened or why his order was ignored.

Instead David enters into deep, unrestrained, unguarded grief (v. 33). This is David’s most distressed moment, and perhaps his greatest. We had watched David grieve over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (1:17–27), and even his unnamed son (12: 16–17). We have heard David grieve with eloquence, but his grief now is not an eloquent performance. It is too elemental and too desperate to be eloquent. David’s desperation matches his yearning in 18:5. In this moment when no friend or adviser dare intervene, David can only utter the name of his son. Three times the name sounds. The wretched acknowledgment “O Absalom, my son, my son!” conveys all the old, hidden betrayals and the old, vibrant hopes.

David’s cry is an anguished review of all that could have been and was not, of dreams so feebly enacted, of caring so selfishly limited, of pride so niggardly expressed. The specifics of the past are much too deep and too painful to utter. Now David in his abandon gathers all that past together in the simple, anguished acknowledgment, “My son.” He utters the phrase five times (v. 33); even then he has not said it often enough to gather the past and resolve all that has been left unresolved. At last David now enters fully into the cost and joy of that relationship. Earlier, he had only been willing to say, “the young man Absalom” (18:5). Now it is not “the young man” but “my son.” David stands barren and uncomforted in his grief.

19:1–4. David’s awesome grief is interrupted by the straightforward statement, “It was told Joab” (v. 1). Business must go on. We are not immediately given Joab’s reaction. The reaction of the populace is evident. What should have been celebration has turned sour. People grow quiet and withdrawn (v. 3). It is only a father crying for a son, but David’s resonance with his people makes this a popular loss. The people will not crowd the king. They will wait with sympathy while the king battles the loss and names the son yet again, the son who is no more (v. 4).

These lines do not need interpretation. Rather, they invite us to stand in awe, to ask what poetic agent had the daring to chronicle the king’s grief, the patience to hear it all, the freedom to couch royal grief in such a way that we can all participate in it. The narrative places David’s grief naked before us and allows us to watch the king probe the reality of life, the

obscenity of war, the wretchedness of death. Surely others grieved that day, not for Absalom but for unnamed sons loved even more than the king loved Absalom. The grief is unresolved, as we knew it would be, as we know it must be. How odd that no one offers to David any gesture of healing. He is alone in this moment. No one intrudes on the king in the midst of the king's hurt.

19:5–8. Joab will not leave David alone in his grief, however. We are given no hint of Joab's own personal reaction to the death or to the grief. He is an utterly public man. Somebody must be in such a crisis. While people were stunned in Dallas at Kennedy's death, somebody had to round up the photographers for the public swearing-in of Johnson. The state has its abiding demands, in seasons of grief as in seasons of triumph. Somebody must attend to those demands. In Jerusalem it is loyal, unmoved Joab who watches over the public trust.

Joab comes to David's house and addresses David for three very long verses (vv. 5–7). Joab addresses David with tough words that no one else dares say. Kings are used to speaking, not listening. Joab talks tougher than even Nathan (12:1–15). He scolds David for not celebrating and being grateful. In Joab's ledger, Absalom does not count. This Absalom who had burned his field (14:29–32) was in fact a traitor and got what a traitor ought to get. Joab does not report to David on his specific act toward Absalom, but he does not deny it. If asked, Joab probably would not have denied killing Absalom.

The important matter is the victory that makes the kingdom safe: the king, the king's sons [sic!], the king's daughters, the king's concubines, the king's wives (v. 5). This is no small matter. David's victory was won at great risk. Joab accuses David of having his priorities confused and his values mixed up. Joab cannot understand how a king would be so soft, unappreciative, and preoccupied to value a traitor over loyal subjects.

Then Joab delivers an ultimatum to David (v. 7): "Now therefore" go make a public appearance. Stand on the balcony, wave to the crowd, salute the flag, thank the troops. Joab does not try to talk David out of his grief. He simply asserts that personal grief is no adequate posture for a king. The threat in his ultimatum is that the troops will desert David if they are not publicly appreciated, if they do not get a signal that their risk matters more than the death of the traitor.

David obeys Joab (v. 8)! David may be relieved that someone will think while he cannot. It is not too much to suggest that in this moment Joab's clearheaded toughness has saved the throne for David. The king's public appearance, arranged by Joab, restores order and confidence. The people are reassured. The king lives. Life can go on; but life will never go on in the same way. The narrative leaves us with the residue of grief unresolved. The grief will linger, for David and for us, forever. Life must go on, but it really does not. David, like most of us, continues, but has died some. We respect, fear, and obey Joab, but we finally are not convinced. In this awful moment, David cannot choose so easily as did Joab, between son and throne, between power and grief. Power will dominate, but sadness will have its own terrible, unsatiated power.

II Samuel 19:9–15

The civil war was more than a son challenging a father. Absalom, attractive figure that he was, became a magnet who evoked and mobilized a variety of forces and parties hostile to or weary of David. The elimination of Absalom and the end of the fighting did not cause the hostility to melt easily away. David was left with the problem of how to reclaim the loyalty of those who had opposed him. This section deals with the aftermath of civil war.

19:9–10. These verses report on the confusion, conflict, and competition between various factions. “The people” (whoever they are) ask why the move to return David to power is so slow. It has been David, after all, who “delivered.” The appeal to David's past acts here suggests that pro-David voices chide those who think there could be any real alternative to David.

19:11–15. David's first act to consolidate his power is to send a message to his old Hebron-based colleagues, the elders of Judah, who had supported Absalom. David chides Judah for being slow to support, when even “all Israel,” the north, had agreed to rejoin David. David reminds the southern elders that their relationship was the earliest base for David's power. The language of “bone and flesh” (v. 12) echoes the initial northern offer of kingship (5:1–2), but the appeal here looks past the northern appeal to the earlier appeal of the Judeans (2:1–4). It is the Judeans who are, in the first

instance, David's "bone and flesh." The language used refers both to old kingship ties and to covenantal commitments. Why should that old relation be forfeited now?

David not only chides in order to win their loyalty; he also negotiates. Amazingly, David promises that Amasa, one of his own kinsmen who led Absalom's forces (17:25), would become his new commander. This is an enormous bargaining gesture. Amasa's ascendance means the displacement of Joab. The daring act of displacing Joab must have indicated how needful David was of Judean support and how willing he was to accommodate. The political risk in displacing Joab must have been something like the risk for President Truman in dismissing General MacArthur from his Pacific command. Surely Joab will not take the dismissal lightly. We may wonder if Joab's sacking is rooted in the events of chapters 18–19 and the death of Absalom. The matter is never mentioned. We do not know if David knows the truth about Absalom's death; most likely the unnamed man had it right: "There is nothing hidden from the king" (18:13). Perhaps David knew more than Joab wanted him to know. As a result of his care, insistence, and daring, David succeeds in his negotiations with the Judean elders. They agree to support him once again (vv. 14–15).

II Samuel 19:16–43

Then follow three meetings that correspond to the encounters David had on his way out of Jerusalem. Shimei (vv. 16–23), Mephibosheth (vv. 24–30), and Barzillai (vv. 31–40) all represent important constituencies with which David must come to terms.

19:16–23. The case of Shimei is the most difficult. We have seen that Shimei speaks for a continuing Saulide constituency who held David responsible for the deaths in the Saul party (16:5–14). But Shimei is no fool. He knows he must deal with this David whom he has labeled a "man of blood." David may be a man of blood, but he is king and now even more firmly entrenched. Shimei therefore comes to meet David and brings with him an impressive array of Benjaminite people, including Ziba (v. 17). Shimei is as profusely supportive now as he was crossly hostile before. He makes an honest statement that acknowledges previous realities but also indicates that he is the first in his support of David (vv. 19–20). Shimei

offers David a gesture of solidarity that may in fact secure David's gratitude and Shimei's survival.

As in the earlier meeting with Shimei, Abishai wants to kill (v. 21). The sons of Zeruah have no political sensitivity. They impress one as military men who are unknowing and uncaring about diplomacy. In his earlier rejection of Abishai's desire to kill, David gave a theological reason (16:11–12). Now David gives a more practical reason. David is "king over Israel" (v. 22). These are not his adversaries but his subjects, and a king does not kill his own subjects. The oath David swears (v. 23) may save the life of Shimei from the hands of the sons of Zeruah. David clearly intends his affirmation of Shimei as a larger strategic gesture to reclaim the loyalty of the north.

19:24–30. The second in this series of meetings is with Mephibosheth, lame son of Jonathan, emblem of Saulide interests. In 16:1–4, Ziba had reported that Mephibosheth regarded Absalom's coup as an opportunity for his own reclaiming of Saul's throne. David had impetuously taken Mephibosheth's property and given it to Ziba. Now, however, Mephibosheth comes forward on his own behalf. He gives the appearance of having passed the time of Absalom's coup in deep mourning for David (v. 24). His unkempt appearance is not the appearance of a man who plans to displace the king. David has to weigh the present appearance of Mephibosheth against the former word of Ziba. To help him arrive at a decision, David examines Mephibosheth about his loyalty. If Mephibosheth had been loyal, he would have fled with David, yet he did not flee.

Mephibosheth is eloquent and persuasive in his answer to David (vv. 26–28). His absence from David was not a defection. It was a deception by Ziba. Then Mephibosheth bears witness that he remembers that previously he and all the Saul party deserved to die and lived only by David's generosity. Mephibosheth would not violate that generosity.

Mephibosheth's response is crafted in a peculiarly delicate way. It could be that he is genuine in his allegiance to David, or it could be that he is only expedient. The words themselves do not give us certainty on the matter. The narrative wants us to experience the uncertainty that David has to adjudicate. The language of Mephibosheth is indeed the language of loyalty, obedience, subservience, and deference. He repeatedly refers to David as "my lord the king." The strong possibility is that his answer to David is

without guile; this impression is reinforced by his surprising statement of verse 30. Thus it seems plausible that Mephibosheth is honest and it is Ziba who has been deceptive. The data are not enough to draw a clear conclusion, but it is the judgment David is prepared to make. He judges Mephibosheth to be his loyal partisan and is prepared to reward him.

David's response is preemptive and abrupt (v. 29). In a flash David understands that he was previously conned by Ziba. He wants no more facts. He does not make inquiry. He wants only to make a magnanimous act that will assure all the Saulides of David's good intention toward them. David reassigns the property of Mephibosheth yet again, returning part of the Saulide patrimony to him. Mephibosheth might have protested this settlement, because Ziba now has half of his estate. He does not protest; rather, he is grateful and loyal. He knows that David is keeping his oath to Jonathan (I Sam. 20:14–17) and to Saul (I Sam. 24:21–22) and that his safety is therefore assured. He can trust David, as can all of Saul's former supporters.

19:31–40. The third meeting is with Barzillai. This is the happiest and easiest meeting. Barzillai is a wealthy landowner from Gilead, thus representing another important constituency. Barzillai's support of David is unwavering. We may imagine Barzillai represents the sentiment of a considerable landed community in the northeast. Barzillai had earlier provided provisions to maintain and sustain David's fighting forces (17: 27–29).

On David's return to power, Barzillai acts as his escort part of the way, to give public expression to his continued support (v. 31). David invites Barzillai to join him in Jerusalem as a part of his government (v. 33). David's power clearly depends on a carefully managed series of alliances, and this alliance is crucial. Barzillai demurs (vv. 34–35). Perhaps his resistance is authentic and is to be taken at face value (vv. 34–37), or perhaps this scene is the judicious bargaining between powerful chieftains. Barzillai affirms his independence from Jerusalem and refuses to be drawn directly into David's orbit of power.

David wants and needs the visible support of Barzillai in his return to power. Barzillai graciously declines but offers his son Chimham in his place. For David's general strategy of recovery, Chimham is as valuable as Barzillai, because either will embody the same assertion of powerful

support. Chimham returns to Jerusalem with David as a sign of a powerful political force firmly allied with David. It is no wonder that at the end of his reign, David remembers Barzillai with graciousness and gratitude (I Kings 2:7).

19:41–43. Even in the face of all of David's political maneuvering, the old, deep tribal differences continue to have power and danger. The northerners are resentful of the southern, initiative taken in verses 14–15 (v. 41). The southerners respond that David is their own favorite son, and of course they have a special relation of privilege (v. 42). The northerners assert they are much larger, they have a greater stake in the kingdom, and they first pressed for David's return (v. 43; vv. 9–10).

The dispute between Judah and Israel is unsettled and has ominous reverberations. The events around Absalom have not created the breach. The division was there all along, covered over only by pious talk, grand political claims, and the power of David's person. The civil war has given new power, vitality, visibility, and credence to the old separatism. The united kingdom of David is exceedingly tenuous. The political realities live in considerable tension with the theological claims. Whatever promise Yahweh will keep to David will be kept amid the troubled realities of power. In all these meetings and bargains we are dealing with hard political reality. God is not visible in this chapter and is mentioned only in conventional formulas. The narrative is content to let the realities of power have their ambiguous say.

II Samuel 20

A Separatist Movement

David had been promised the throne by Yahweh and has received it. It is, however, a fragile crown, tenuously held. Our narrator will not permit the high claims of royal theology to override the stubbornness of recalcitrant facts. David's rule is regularly at risk and in question. The most dramatic case of risk was Absalom's revolt (15:1—19:8). Second Samuel 19:41–43, however, indicates that the unity of north and south was never well established.

Separatist movements are endlessly vexatious for states that impose political union on disparate and uncongenial political communities. (The case of the Basques within the Spanish state is a powerful and perennial case in point.) The central government is nearly helpless in the face of such a resistant element within the larger state. In this instance, a Benjaminite named Sheba leads a separatist movement against David. Sheba asserts that the tribe of Benjamin (with its old Saulide identity and its older Mosaic tradition) has never been a part of the ambitious Davidic enterprise.

20:1–3. The cry of Sheba (v. 1) is a summons to political separatism. His words were probably a conventional rallying cry for the traditionalists in the north, whereby the emerging state was resisted (cf. I Kings 12:16). The separatist slogan undermines the Davidic claim to sovereignty. From the perspective of the monarchy, Sheba's cry is treasonable. Verse 2 contrasts the loyalty of Judah with the separatism of the north.

Verse 3 suggests that David seeks to respond to the threat of a separatist north. It must have been galling to the traditional north that the king in Jerusalem has concubines. The presence of concubines suggests how much the monarchy has embraced the royal ideology of the Near East, which is inimical to the old covenant tradition. David takes a drastic step of confining the concubines and presumably having no more to do with them. His action is most likely a concession and a conciliatory gesture to the north. By this act David moves visibly away from the royal ideology in the direction of the old requirements of covenant. In making this move, David

not only distances himself from his own former practice but also offers a contrast to the conduct of Absalom (16:21–22).

20:4–22. The overriding issue for David, however, is not the removal of concubines but an effective response to the northern challenge. The narrative is noticeably restrained in its unstated hints of tension. David summons Amasa to do his duty (v. 4), but Amasa delays (v. 5). The delay is not a casual “being late for the boss.” It reflects a failure to obey, probably reflecting a deep policy disagreement. David never says a word of rebuke to him. Instead, David promptly dispatches Abishai to do what Amasa did not do. David circumvents Amasa. The sons of Zeruah are always available, always responsive and loyal. David cannot wait on the tardy Amasa while the northern movement is mobilized. David sends his crack hired troops under Abishai—and Joab (v. 7). The goal of the mission of Abishai is the elimination of Sheba and the Benjaminite challenge.

Amasa belatedly joins the attack. The narrative has focused on large public actions; now it pauses to describe this one-on-one meeting in detail (vv. 8–10). Joab feigns friendship, proposes to kiss Amasa, no doubt a standard greeting among military leaders (cf. Luke 22:48). In the guise of friendship, however, Joab is treacherous. While his right hand is free, he carries a sword in the other hand (cf. Judg. 4:19–22) and strikes one mighty blow against the king’s new commander. Amasa is dead with that one blow. Joab has uttered not a word. He never blinks, never misses a step. He proceeds immediately to the northern campaign. Swiftly, silently, and mercilessly, Joab has eliminated his rival. Joab has killed Amasa as he killed Abner (3:27) and as he killed Absalom (18:14–15). Through the killings, Joab remains David’s sure man, however, and that is enough (cf. v. 11).

Sheba has holed up in the city of Abel (vv. 14–15). Joab lays siege to the city in order to destroy it. Joab is a master at siege and at destroying cities (11:1; 12:26–31). There is an interruption in Joab’s plan, however (vv. 16–22). A wise woman intervenes (v. 16). The wise are those not trapped in conventional perceptions. They are those who can think of an alternative way around the present set of circumstances. In this case the only option seems to be Joab versus Sheba to the death. The city is sure to be destroyed in the process of the armed confrontation.

The woman wants to save the city, so she negotiates with Joab. She reminds him that Abel is an old and venerated city. Indeed, this old city is a “mother in Israel,” a place to which people have looked for guidance, well-being, and life (vv. 18–19).

The compelling words of the wise woman provide a poignant contrast to the ruthless intent of Joab. The woman speaks powerful words out of the tradition, about the “heritage of the LORD” which cannot be abused, even by royal power, as Joab proposes to do (v. 19). Indeed, the contrast between the city (whose voice is the woman) and David (whose agent is Joab) is striking. This challenge to Joab is a voice that is “peaceable and faithful” in Israel, a mothering voice that speaks for this mothering city. Joab and the might of the monarchy have come with arms to destroy. The peaceable woman and the peaceable city stand against the warring, destructive intention of the king. The king would destroy a peaceable city to advance his own interests. The raging intent of Joab is broken by the compelling voice of this woman.

As in 14:2–20, a woman speaks the word that breaks the threat of the king, a woman who stands outside the seduction of politics and militarism and can imagine another way. She prevails even against arms and anger. The peaceable city is rescued, the heritage of the Lord is saved. The wisdom of the woman and the well-being of the city stand together. Wise words override ruthless policy. At the end, not only the woman and the city are saved; something of David’s dignity and self-respect are also rescued from Joab’s mad, obedient intent.

Joab disavows any hostility or desire to damage the city. He wants only the traitor, Sheba, who must be killed. The woman agrees to save the city by surrendering Sheba (cf. Jer. 38:2). The deal is cut. Sheba is given up into Joab’s hand. The city is saved. The traitor is dead (v. 22). The rebellion is ended; Joab returns to the king in Jerusalem. Joab has once more done for David what is necessary to save the throne.

20:23–26. These verses indicate an end to the extended narrative of II Samuel 9–20. As though to signify that the action is over and the king is safe and well-established, the text reviews the royal bureaucracy. The list at the end of this long narrative of David and his family is matched to that placed at its beginning. Thus the narrative of David’s family is framed in 8:15–18 and 20:23–26 by two inventories of bureaucratic organization. We

note again the military and priestly leaders. We may note especially that in verse 24 we have the first mention of “forced labor,” an abusive practice most often linked to Solomon (I Kings 5:13; 9:15–22). The inclusion in the list of forced labor, mercenaries, and a “recorder” suggests that the old tribal vision of covenantal power has considerably eroded under David. The initial offer of Israel’s throne was in the form of a covenant 332 (5:1–3), but the presence of these officers tells against a covenantal version of royal power.

The raw political strength that dominates this story of David’s return to power presents the wise woman of 20:16–22 as an important contrast. She stands as an alternative to the relentlessness of David and the ruthlessness of Joab. In the midst of Jerusalem’s *Realpolitik*, the wise woman can remember another way. She can still imagine that careful speech, peaceable treasuring, and secure trust offer another way in public life. There is more to public life than David’s sexual politics or Joab’s killing fields. The narrative of 19:8—20:15 reports a gathering of power into the hands of the royal ideologues.

That monopoly of power is not yet complete, however. David is increasingly a grasper, but the memory of gifts still lingers. The modest protest of the old honored city of Abel against royal ruthlessness stands juxtaposed to the royal encampment of Jerusalem. This tale of David beginning in I Samuel 16 is essentially an account of David on the way to royal power in Jerusalem; that royal enclave, however, does not yet control everything. This concluding list asserts the intent of the Jerusalem establishment to have its own way. As we shall see in the final chapters of II Samuel, that royal intent is not yet an achievement.

PART SIX

Memories of David

II SAMUEL 21—24

It shall not be so among you;
but whoever would be great
among you must be your servant,
and whoever would be first
among you must be slave of all.

Mark 10:43–44

It is a common view of scholars that I Kings 1–2 directly continues the narrative of II Samuel 20. This means that II Samuel 21–24 are an intrusion into that single continuing story. This intruding material is commonly regarded as a miscellaneous appendix, consisting of materials that are old and have originated at various times but now have been grouped here. It is a commonplace to notice that this material consists of six elements, arranged in a chiastic pattern (McCarter 1984, pp. 18–19). That is, the material is arranged in three concentric circles. In the outer circle are two *narratives* (21:1–14 and 24:1–25); within that circle are two *lists* (21:15–22 and 23:8–39); at the center are the final pair of elements, two *songs* (22:1–51 and 23:1–7). It is commonly thought that this arrangement cannot be accidental.

II Samuel 21

A Narrative and a List

II Samuel 21:1–14

This narrative is a jolt to our expectations. In the preceding account of David, we have come to expect that David is a man of *hesed* who will keep his vows of loyalty, especially to Saul and Jonathan. Here David is cast in a very different role. I suggest that this narrative is deliberately intended as a protest against the preceding “official” portrayal of David. That is, the narrative is presented with high irony, to suggest that David in fact is not as we had first thought him to be.

It is possible to read the narrative without irony and therefore not as a protest. Such a conventional reading understands David as a faithful king who enacts proper royal rituals to overcome the residue of bloodguilt left by Saul. Such a reading offers a straightforward sequence: (1) Saul committed *bloodguilt* (v. 1); (2) the bloodguilt causes *famine*; and (3) David “*expiates*” the bloodguilt and so ends the famine (v. 3). Thus David makes life possible in a situation where Saul had brought death. David kills seven heirs of Saul, but only in the line of duty (vv. 6, 8–9). In the end, David is gentle with the bodies of Saul and Jonathan (v. 14). This picture shows that David is faithful, effective, pious, and respectful of Saul. He does what is necessary to save his people from famine. Thus a positive picture of David emerges.

This is a possible reading. If one follows this interpretation, then our exposition might focus on the reality of bloodguilt, the requirement of expiation, the reality and legitimacy of vengeance, and the role of a faithful king in effecting expiation.

This reading depends, however, on one very important assumption. The connection of Saul’s bloodguilt and the famine is made only in verse 1, in an oracle from Yahweh given only to David. That is, the oracle is private for the king; no one else has access to the oracles; or it is given through a priest who is on the king’s payroll. A positive reading of David in this narrative depends completely on the claim of this oracle. The oracle asserts that the

cause of famine is Saul's slaughter of the Gibeonites. Given this affirmation, everything else in the narrative follows. The problem is that the assertion that Saul killed the Gibeonites lacks any supportive testimony. There is no hint anywhere in the Saul narrative that Saul conducted such a slaughter. Because the Saul narrative has been transmitted through Davidic hands, we would expect such a report to be preserved, since the David ideologues would preserve every negative report about Saul. Because there is no such report preserved in the narrative, we may conclude there never was such a report. And if there was no such report, we may doubt that the Israelite tradition ever had such a memory of Saul. Because the oracle to David is quite private and because the tradition does not support the oracle, we may surmise that the oracle lacks historical support and is in fact a piece of Davidic fabrication.

Thus I suggest that the oracle that links the famine to the failure of Saul serves primarily to give David warrant for his violence against the house of Saul. Saul and his family are endlessly problematic to David. David has given protection to Mephibosheth (9:1) because he is lame and constitutes no political threat. David has made an oath concerning the family of Jonathan and the name of Saul, but he has made no such promises concerning the "sons of Rizpah" and the "sons of Merab" (v. 8). Thus David is technically free to take action against other members of Saul's house without violating his explicit oaths. I suggest then that the narrative intends to be ironic. It intends to show that David is indeed a ruthless opportunist who has found a way to eliminate the Saulide threat, and to do so in the guise of religious legitimacy and political necessity. The accusation of Shimei (16:8), that David shed Saulide blood, is perhaps linked to this narrative.

As we approach this narrative, then, more than one reading is possible. A more conventional reading takes the narrative at face value and sees David as the antidote to Saul's guilt. A more suspicious reading (which I have proposed) concerns David's brutal act of self-interest, committed in the name of responsible religion and justifiable politics.

In reading this text, we must make a crucial interpretive decision. It may be that this text agrees with the preceding picture of David. Or it may be, as I have suggested, that this narrative (and the remainder of chs. 21–24) are a protest against a picture of David that is too affirmative and uncritical. In making this interpretive decision, we must decide about the capacity of the

narrative to speak ironically, so that things are not as they appear at first glance. And we must decide about the appropriateness of *Realpolitik* in our reading of the text. My judgment is that *Realpolitik* is crucial in this reported action of David, and therefore the narrative is a highly ironic rendering of him.

Given this interpretation, the king who is presented as faithfully executing his office is in fact a ruthless, self-seeking king who takes desperate measures to secure his throne. “Reasons of state” are powerful for the Davidic enterprise. Such “reasons” are palatable if they are couched in the language of piety and religious primitivism. The problem with David’s claim in verse 1 is that Saul’s alleged act is without evidence. Moreover, Saul is a scrupulously religious man who is unlikely to evoke such bloodguilt (cf. I Sam. 14:45). We might expect Saul to have such restraining scruples. The narrative may suggest to us, in the guise of a simple report, that David has no such restraining scruple. Believing David’s rationale and the accusation against Saul requires innocent credulity. The alternative offered in this interpretation doubts such credulity, moving behind the religious claim to the political reality.

II Samuel 21:15–22

The second element in the appendix is a list. To be sure, this section contains narrative elements; it is conventional in current scholarship, however, to treat the material as a list, in symmetrical relation to the list of 23:8–39. The list reflects Israel’s early wars with the Philistines (5:17–25). Each episode begins with the announcement of war against the Philistines (vv. 15, 18, 19, 20). Each element in the list reflects a hero from the Philistine conflicts. No doubt, in the tradition of Israel, each of these heroes was the subject of more extended narrative accounts.

The text falls into two parts that stand in an odd tension with each other. In verses 15–17, David is wearied from battle and thus is vulnerable before Ishbibenob, a Philistine giant. David is rescued by Abishai, who kills the huge Philistine. Again, it is a son of Zeruiah who acts when David has need. The particular focus of these verses is on David’s “weariness.” David is not strong, vigorous, and capable; he is weak and needful. This may be an “older” David whose powers are diminished, or perhaps a more candid

report on David. The response of David's men is of particular interest. David will not go to the battlefield any more, "lest you quench the lamp of Israel." These words are an eloquent statement of royal theology (Johnson, pp. 1–2). David is to stay safely at home because his very person now embodies what is precious and life-giving (cf. 18:3). David is exceedingly well served by his men. At the same time, the popular tradition of David's heroic prowess is called into question, for he himself does nothing in this narrative report.

II Samuel 22

A Song of David

The third element in the appendix is a long poem, which also exists independently as Psalm 18. Thus it is most likely that the shapers of Samuel have taken a well-known liturgic piece and placed it here as a concluding theological reflection on the life and faith of David. The poem functions (together with 23:1–7) as a counterpart to the song of Hannah (I Sam. 2:1–10). The literature of Samuel is thus bracketed by songs addressed to Yahweh: the song of Hannah at the beginning and the song of David at the conclusion.

This inclusion provides a theological context in which the whole of the literature of I and II Samuel is to be understood. The history of David (and of Israel) is not simply a tale of power and conflict but concerns the enactment of Yahweh's sovereignty. The dominant theme of this literature is deliverance by Yahweh, for which Israel is profoundly grateful. Israel was able to see that it was by David's hand that deliverance was wrought in Israel. Israel also knows, however, that beyond David, the real agent of deliverance is always and everywhere the God of Israel (cf. I Sam. 17:34–37). It is for this reason that this song of deliverance (cf. vv. 1, 18, 44) was readily taken up for David (v. 1). Songs of deliverance are originally indeterminate and without a specific setting or speakers; by being placed in the midst of the David narrative, the songs of deliverance by Yahweh are celebrated in the orbit of David. David becomes the one in Israel who has peculiar reason to thank Yahweh for the deliverances Yahweh has wrought.

This hymn of Yahweh's deliverance thus assures that Israel's life is discerned theonomously. This relentless reference to God has the effect of destabilizing and deabsolutizing every claim that the king is the deliverer.

22:1–7. The opening of the psalm speaks about the work of Yahweh and the trust of the speaker in the most intimate terms. These verses are dominated by the pronoun “my” and claim Yahweh as the one who is committed to “my” well-being. The substantive words are all of rescue: deliverance, salvation, savior, saved. This God is surely “worthy to be praised” (v. 4).

The speaker knows that his life has been lost. He is without recourse. Then life is suddenly, inexplicably, given back to him. In response, the speaker cannot explain or understand. He can only praise Yahweh with abandonment. This is the voice of one whose end seemed near, yet whose life has been opened in unexpected goodness.

The language of verses 5–6 and 7 make a powerful contrast. Verses 5–6 utilize mythic language of being caught in the chaotic waters with their killing power: “waves, torrents, cords, snares.” The whole of life has turned enemy and there is no way to turn. In the face of that primordial power for death, however, the speaker has recourse to Israel’s most elemental act of faith: “I called ... he heard” (v. 7). In the face of the mythic language of chaos (vv. 5–6), Israel utilizes the covenantal language of cry-hear (v. 7). How can such a simple and straightforward form of speech and action counter the death articulated in verses 5–6? But of course that is the nature of Israel’s faith. The God of Israel, faithful and attentive, is available and can be summoned (v. 7) into situations where life is in jeopardy (vv. 5–6). These are the “waves of death.” In response to the cry, there is an answering which saves.

22:8–20. After the covenantal affirmation of verse 7, the poem reverts to powerful symbolic language to articulate the gospel of rescue. As an answer to the mythic language of *death and despair* (vv. 5–6), Israel employs the powerful mythic language of *theophany* to express God’s powerful, transformative, rescuing coming (vv. 8–20). In this poem the dramatic transition from the language of death and despair to the language of God’s coming is made by Israel’s most elemental speech of cry–hear in verse 7.

The good news is that the desperate prayers of Israel evoke the God of Israel to powerful intervention. The poet makes use of standard theophanic language to characterize the decisive, disruptive coming of God into a situation of jeopardy. This God comes not like a thief in the night but boldly, publicly, terrifyingly. This God who caused the earth to tremble at Mount Sinai is characteristically ready to cause trembling, for God comes with power and fierceness. God comes to intervene on behalf of the beloved who pray. God’s self is aligned with Israel against the power of death. Israel knew all too well about the threat of death. In its songs of praise, Israel enunciates this third party, who changes the situation of Israel vis-à-vis

death. In this text, the dramatic move from death to rescue by way of cry-save is placed in the trusting, thankful mouth of David.

The rhetoric of God's powerful coming (vv. 8–20) completely overwhelms and nullifies the threat of death. God comes powerfully and irresistibly, like a warrior on a horse (cf. Ex. 15:1), like a rider on the clouds (vv. 9–13). God rebukes the chaotic waters (v. 16). God delivers (v. 18). God draws Israel up into safety from the waters (v. 17). God delivers because God has delight in David, this Israelite who trusts God (v. 20). The language of this poem is reminiscent of the exodus lyrics of Exodus 15 and Psalm 114. The language is also used in the Christian tradition, witnessing to Jesus' magisterial act of quieting the waters (Mark 6:45–51). From exodus to Jesus, the powerful, imaginative language of intervention and rescue witnesses to the reality of chaos and bears testimony to the greater power of Yahweh, who tames the waters and defeats chaos.

While the theophanic language of intervention and rescue is strange to us, the experience of chaos is quite well known. Indeed, chaos (and not guilt) is the besetting issue in our common experience. The threat of chaos is known most intimately in broken interpersonal relations. The same threat is also known most massively and publicly in relation to the looming danger of nuclear holocaust. That looming is so massive for us that we have no words to express its depth, power, and horror. People of faith have always turned to lyrical, poetic language to speak about the threats for which conventional language is inadequate. How extraordinary that Israel's lyrical language (here in the mouth of David) offers us language not only about chaos but also about rescue, language that is primitive and elemental but powerfully contemporary.

It is not difficult to speak about chaos, as is evident in many artistic and musical expressions. It is much more difficult to speak of the rescue in an equally primitive, elemental way. The theological issue for interpretation is not whether Israel's theophanic language is "metaphysically" accurate. Rather, we face a practical question: Dare we speak as David speaks? Dare we permit our imagination to participate actively in the ongoing drama of terror and rescue? Israel regularly participates in the drama of death and rescue with Yahweh because Israel is a people of passion and freedom. The alternative to Israel's dangerous way of speaking, which is candid, concrete, daring, and imaginative, is either to deny the threat and pretend that life is reasonable or to admit the threat but despair of any rescue. Israel, in this

lyrical boldness, refuses either to deny or to despair. Israel speaks fully the chaos and speaks boldly and confidently the more powerful rescue. For Israel, the rescue is more powerful than the threat because the subject of its lyrical imagination is Yahweh, the one already known as more powerful than death and chaos.

22:21–28. These verses exhibit a remarkable change of mood from what preceded. Lyrical abandonment gives way to moral symmetry and the daring affirmation that the reason God has heard and intervened is because “I was blameless” (v. 24). The mood is so changed that some scholars have concluded these verses are a different poem. It is also possible to say, however, when we remember that these words are placed in David’s mouth, that this is a bold, even shameless move of royal ideology. The king wants not only to confess that God heard the petition but that in some way God is only doing God’s part in an equitable partnership. Taken at its worst, this part of the psalm asserts that the speaker deserves God’s action and God is only keeping covenant. Taken at its best, this unit affirms that obedience to God is crucial for the overcoming of death. While God is powerfully gracious, God is not morally indifferent or casual. God pays attention to those who attend to the commandments.

When these words are spoken by David (vv. 21–28), they constitute a stunning, incongruous statement. The words intend to be didactic. They assert that God is morally serious and rewards those who are obedient. On the lips of David, however, the words take on an ironic quality. To be didactic toward others, the speaker must make an affirmation about himself. He must say, “I am blameless” (v. 26). The point of the affirmation is that God deals well with the blameless.

For David to make such a claim is odd and incongruous, for Israel knows better. Israel dares to say of David that he is blameless—“except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite” (I Kings 15:5). This of course is no small exception! The episode of Uriah the Hittite (II Sam. 11–12) establishes that David is not blameless and therefore not entitled to the benefits Yahweh gives him. Thus the didactic part of the psalm seems to make a point about moral coherence, but in fact it asserts that God gives gifts and rescues well beyond moral symmetry. The middle portion of the psalm thus affirms something very different from what it seems to confess. The words invite reflection on the tension between the *moral seriousness* of covenant

obedience, which David confesses but does not live, and the *free rescue* of God, which is done even for those who are blameless. What intends to be moral instruction turns out to be a celebration of God's gracious goodness. Israel knows enough about David that the claim of "blameless" can only be heard ironically.

22:29–51. After the didactic interlude of verses 21–28, the psalm returns to a more lyrical tone. It reiterates something of the claim of verses 1–20 about God's power to intervene, but with a different nuance. In verses 1–20 the speaker can only cry; all the action is by God. In verses 29–51 the speaker (the king?) begins with a new self-assertion. First-person singular pronouns are now the subject of the action verbs: "I, I, I, I" (vv. 30, 38, 39, 43; cf. 45–46). The singer celebrates his own capacity: "I can leap over a wall" (v. 30). This is the voice of someone who is powerful and able and unembarrassed about his own exploits.

Kings can defer to Yahweh only so long. Powerful people cannot continually refer all the credit elsewhere, or they will finally lose their power, authority, and credibility. They must eventually assert themselves. That is the situation of this singer. We hear the voice of a king who has been bold in war, who comes home triumphant, and who delights in telling about his great achievements.

The poem is delicately crafted, however, to deny the king the full credit he might claim. Yes, "I can leap over a wall," but that ability is "by my God" (v. 30). In every part of this self-assertion and self-congratulation, the claim of the king is juxtaposed to the more powerful acknowledgment of Yahweh. The voice of a powerful warrior speaks, but his words are set within a particular context: "God trains my hands for war" (v. 35); God gives me the shield of salvation (v. 36); "Thou didst gird me with strength" (v. 40); "Thou didst make my enemies turn their backs to me" (v. 41). God gives triumph to the king, God shows steadfast love to God's anointed (v. 51). The royal first-person pronoun is repeatedly qualified by an ultimate "Thou."

Insofar as the psalm is the voice of David, it readily acknowledges his power, gifts, and achievements. In the midst of this celebration of the king, however, the psalm holds with great discipline to a more elemental conviction. It is God who gives victory. It is God who brings low and lifts high. It is God (not David) who has wrought the great victories. The psalm

thus reiterates some of the main claims of the song of Hannah (2:1–10). In fact, when read attentively, this psalm debunks the very royal claims of David it seems to celebrate. In the end, it is Yahweh who has made the decisive difference.

The psalm gladly celebrates David as the great warrior and deliverer. But David is celebrated only penultimately. Israel knows that not David but Yahweh is the deliverer and rescuer who wins battles. The psalm, which seems to assert the significance of the king in the end, qualifies the significance of the king and refuses to give the king excessive credit or stature. This refusal on Israel's part is not because of David's failure, or because of Uriah the Hittite. It is rather because of what the tradition has known and affirmed long before David. It is Yahweh, only Yahweh, who is sovereign in Israel, among the nations, and in all creation. Kings may come and go, may succeed and cry out, may obey and disobey. After all that kings do and do not do, however, Yahweh is still sovereign and must be praised.

David the suppliant (v. 7) and David the victor (v. 43) are the same man. This man, like every person, like all Israel, stands in awe and gratitude before real sovereignty. That real governance is oddly committed to David and is utterly faithful to David. Israel, however, is never ambiguous about who cries and who hears (v. 7; I Sam. 7:8–9; 12:18). David is not the answerer. David is the petitioner who is given adequate gifts for his mandate from Yahweh. David is not a self-starter. It is only Yahweh who

makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes.

I Samuel 2:7–8

David's capacity for life rests in this affirmation. When David forgets Yahweh's sovereignty and imagines he is autonomous, he brings death on himself and on his people. Only Yahweh is the giver of life!

II Samuel 23

A Song and a List

II Samuel 23:1–7

This shorter poem is a partner to 22:1–51. The two poems stand together at the center of the appendices and serve as a critical summary of royal ideology. As noted earlier, this poem and the song of Hannah (I Sam. 2:1–10) serve as lyrical-theological affirmations that bracket the entire story of David and kingship. In the narrative account of the books of Samuel, we are given access to the ambiguity of David’s rise and rule. The poems at beginning and end, however, place all of that historical concreteness under the discipline and affirmation of royal certitude. The poems at beginning and end articulate God’s resolve to have “an anointed king,” God’s resolve to use the anointed one to bring well-being, and God’s power to raise up a king congenial to God’s purpose (I Sam. 2:10; II Sam. 23:1).

Three motifs form the basis of our exposition. First, God has raised on high the anointed (v. 2), who is addressed by the “Spirit of the LORD” (v. 3). Kingship—that is, the kingship of David—is not a historical accident of human achievement. It is the result of God’s resolve to create a *novum* in Israel. Kingship in Israel is a gift of God’s sovereign power; the king lives only by the decree (word), power (spirit), and will of Yahweh. The faithfulness of God makes monarchy possible.

That high claim functions in two important ways. On the one hand, it asserts and establishes divine legitimacy for the king, reminding subjects and enemies that he has the authority “of God” (Rom. 13:1). The king’s authority is not a political convenience but belongs to God’s ordering of creation. On the other hand, the high claim is a warning to the king that the king is never autonomous or self-made. The king is always God’s creature and serves at God’s behest for God’s purposes.

Second, the king is to rule “justly” (*ṣaddiq*) (v. 3). Kingship is not merely a gift of power. It is a concern for public well-being. Royal theology at its best summons the king to attend to issues of justice and righteousness,

to the administration of public power for the sake of the weak, powerless, afflicted, and marginal (e.g., Psalm 72). The record of kingship in Israel is very mixed. Rehoboam and Jehoiakim may be cited as kings who least attended to the key issues of righteousness and justice (I Kings 12:14; Jer. 22:13–14), whereas Josiah is celebrated as the most faithful in adhering to God’s will for righteousness and equity (II Kings 23:25; Jer. 22:15–16).

Royal theology can thus wax eloquent about the governance of a “just king” (Whitelam). Such a rule is like the sun that shines to give life, like the rain that causes the earth to produce (v. 4; cf. Ps. 72:5–7). In its lyrical imagination, Israel likens the power of good public administration to the power for life in a well-ordered creation. The king does indeed hold power for life or for death. The “just king” is one who knows that all life and all power belong to God. The royal office is derivative. This is the meaning of “fear of God” (v. 3).

The antithesis of such justice is the public attitude and practice of “godless people”—“worthless fellows” (v. 6; cf. I Sam. 10:27) who cannot endure and who are “thrown away” (v. 6) or “utterly consumed with fire” (v. 7). The psalm speaks of enemies of the king, but the words also contain a warning to the king. In such irresponsible people, there is neither sun nor rain nor life.

Third, verse 5 contains an articulation of God’s most enduring promise in Israel, “an everlasting covenant” (*berit ‘olam*). The conviction that God has made an abiding, unconditional promise with “my house” appears to echo and derive from the royal decree of 7:14–16. The Davidic house is not a tenuous historical institution but an ontological structure based in God’s decree. This same language is used in the royal psalm of Psalm 89:28–37. The same language of promise, moreover, is used to guarantee the world after the flood (Gen. 9:16). In exilic poetry there is a convergence of the motifs of Davidic promise, flood promise, and guarantee of creation (Isa. 54:9–10; 55:3), all of which are ways of witnessing to God’s long-term fidelity (cf. Jer. 31:35–37).

These three motifs then—God’s sovereign power (vv. 1–2), God’s moral expectation (v. 3), and God’s abiding fidelity (v. 5)—provide the clues to the shape and significance of David’s rule. It is evident that the historical reality of David stands in considerable tension with this magisterial assertion.

This high royal theology is taken up and used by the early church for christological affirmation. The New Testament found this language readily appropriate for Jesus—who is raised to power, who ruled justly, and who bears God’s abiding commitment.

II Samuel 23:8–39

These verses comprise a list that corresponds roughly to the list of 21:15–21. The unit includes three distinct elements. First, verses 8–12 report on the identity and effectiveness of David’s three most prominent and celebrated soldiers. Second, verses 18–39 give a second list, the thirty soldiers who are much celebrated in Israel but not as renowned as “the three.” These two groups, the three and the thirty, constitute the core of David’s military organization. Third, between the two lists, verses 13–17 include a remarkable narrative, showing the courage and loyalty of David’s soldiers as well as David’s solidarity with them.

23:8–12. “The three” are models of courage and loyalty in David’s army. The list reflects the early days of David when a soldier’s credentials were established in battle against the Philistines. Later on, when the monarchy became more bureaucratic, David relied more on mercenaries. In the early days, however, David relied singularly on the brave men who trusted him and willingly followed his leadership.

Two facets of this list deserve mention. First, in verses 1 and 12 the victories are credited to Yahweh, not to the soldiers or to David. The list reflects a powerful theological awareness. Second, except for the introductory formula of verse 8, David is not present in the list. Not all victories must be credited to David. There is room for other heroes, other winners, other celebrities (cf. 12:26–31). There is a powerful democratic tendency in this list. In the highest royal theology, everything must be assigned to the king. In state ideology, there are no named or known agents except the king. (This is evident in the Assyrian records, in which the great king is the only named warrior.) The departure from monopolistic ideology in these verses reflects either David’s largeness of spirit, for he did not need to monopolize credit, or the subtle intent of the narrative to qualify David and thus remind Israel that its greatness is not equated with the person of David.

It is likely that the *theonomous* inclination of the narrative, which credits Yahweh, and the *democratic* tendency, which names other heroes, are related to each other. State absolutism will attempt to silence theonomy and to nullify democracy. The list thus makes an important statement about social power. The list specifies and celebrates theonomous, democratic power as the proper way of David's rule; and it warns against absolutism, which would credit neither Yahweh nor other human heroes.

23:13–17. In the midst of the list of David's fighting men is an odd, isolated narrative. Because David is fighting the Philistines in this episode, the narrative must be rooted in David's earlier days. The story portrays David's remarkable relation to his fighting comrades.

In the midst of the battle, David is so human as to yearn out loud for water from Bethlehem, his hometown. The David reflected here is the David of the early days, before he was enmeshed in the seductive royal power of the Jerusalem establishment. This is evident in two ways. First, David is a flesh-and-blood man who has elemental yearnings and who is so close to his men that he can share those yearnings. Second, he is not yet captured by the big-time royal pretensions of the court but is still responsive to his village roots. He still remembers Bethlehem and how the water from its well tasted. This is indeed a human David, available to his men. The ideological enhancement of David, which makes him unavailable and unlike other people, has not yet set in (cf. 18:3).

David's men are utterly devoted to him. They regard his wish as their command. They secure the water from Bethlehem at great risk to themselves. But David is as devoted to them as he is eloquent, more sensitive than any would expect. We expect David to be grateful, but he is more than grateful. David responds out of a "sacramental imagination." He is able to discern immediately that this water, acquired at great risk and with the utter devotion of his men, has within it the bonding power of sacrament. Moreover David knows that to drink this water would be a violation of something holy that binds him to his men. David's words reflect the danger of such a violation: "Far be it from me" (v. 17); that is, "It would be profane." Instead of drinking the water, David pours it on the ground. David enacts a deep solidarity with his men by pouring the water into the earth, where none can abuse or possess the water. No wonder his men stood in

awe of him, their devotion rewarded. The story reflects a power and authority that does not “lord it over” (cf. Mark 10:42–44).

No doubt the story is preserved and told to enhance David. To that extent the narrative serves a propagandistic function. The narrator proposes a very particular kind of David, however, a David with believable innocence, with egalitarian sensitivity, who prized solidarity more than his own satisfaction. The narrative thus functions as a protest against the David of selfish arrogance and absolute ideology. In a very different context David might be perceived as “worth ten thousand of us” (18:3), but not here. David is here honored and celebrated, but not at the cost of his men.

It is no wonder that the chronicler has taken this innocent-looking narrative about David and made it crucial to his presentation of David (I Chron. 11:15–19). The chronicler has placed this story at the beginning of the David narrative as a clue and key for what follows.

23:18–39. The second part of the list of warriors continues with those of a slightly lesser rank. The formal name of this group is “the thirty,” though the text includes thirty-seven names (v. 39). Those named are the ones who provided the muscle for David’s power. This list understands the reality of power and knows that, along with personal cunning and divine promise, royal authority is gathered and held by those with adequate military support. David’s story is an exercise in real power, with all its compromises and ambiguities.

Of this list, we may speak about five names: (1) Abishai, brother of Joab, is the most renowned of the thirty (v. 19). He is David’s most ruthless aide. (2) Benaiah is a much-renowned warrior (vv. 20–23). As the head of the bodyguard, (i.e., the Secret Service), he is a palace favorite who must have known all about palace intrigue. In David’s old age, Benaiah makes a move for power and is aligned with the palace clique against the old David loyalists (I Kings 1:7–8). (3) Asahel, brother of Abishai, is named, even though he departs the David story quite early (v. 24; cf. 3:22–23). (4) Perhaps tellingly, the last name on the list is “Uriah the Hittite” (v. 39). The narrative exercises great restraint. Much more might have been said in relation to this name, but perhaps it was unnecessary. The mere mention of Uriah’s name is enough to evoke the full memory. Uriah made the list of the most valiant. David’s power depended on such as Uriah, the very one he killed to save his throne! The terseness of the mention says more than an

abundance of words could. (5) The most prominent name is the one that is absent—Joab. The absence is spectacular. We do not know why he is missing. Perhaps his name did not even need to be mentioned. We know Joab presided over everything most crucial to David. It is a measure of his power that his armor-bearer made the list (v. 36). Joab is most likely not as absent as he appears to be. He hovers everywhere in David's story, characteristically ruthless, relentless, and decisive. David lives in a world of blood, power, violence, and force. The list asserts that it is in, with, and under such reality that God keeps promises.

II Samuel 24

A Sin and a Prayer

The concluding chapter of II Samuel is complicated and complex. In the chiasmic arrangement of chapters 21–24, this narrative is a counterpart of 21:1–14. Like that narrative, this narrative includes a hidden affront against Yahweh, a judgment against the whole people by Yahweh for the hidden affront, and an act of the king to avert the judgment.

II Samuel 24:1–17

24:1. The hidden cause of the trouble is credited to Yahweh. The narrative begins abruptly. Yahweh is angry. We are not told why; the narrative does not speculate or explain. Yahweh's anger is a condition of the narrative to follow. In utter freedom Yahweh can be angry, as later on in this narrative Yahweh can be merciful. It is the unexplained, inexplicable anger of Yahweh that initiates the story. Verse 1 is a remarkable statement, because it is Yahweh's anger that "incites" to census, the very census that will later evoke punishment from God. Clearly the God of this narrative will not be understood in terms of our conventional notions of God and God's morality. The God of this narrative is unfettered and dangerous, and beyond our discernment. David must live and rule in the presence of and under the sovereignty of this God who is unfettered and dangerous. This is the story of David being placed in great risk and coming to terms with this God beyond royal reasonableness. The drama is much larger than David. He must find his place in this drama he cannot direct.

"Yahweh incited." This exceedingly problematic assertion is not unlike "Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh" (Ex. 10:1, 20). Why would God instigate an act that must later be punished? We do not know the ways of God. This first verse lies outside the narrative action and bears witness to God's inscrutability. In a world where there are no secondary causes and Yahweh is the only cause, this is an adequate statement. David (like Job) must play his role in a theological drama that is much larger than he is.

David is not unlike Job, for whom there is an “instigation” beyond his control or knowledge. David, like Job, is not there “at the beginning” (Job 38:4). It is evident in I Chronicles 21:1 that this initial statement was eventually recognized as theologically tricky. Verse 1 lies outside and before the drama itself. After this verse, the narrative turns to David, who plays his part, who asserts, suffers, repents, and obeys.

24:2–9. The center of the narrative is a lawsuit. Verses 2–9 state the sin; verses 10–17 state the punishment. The census ordered by David (which Yahweh instigates) is a sin. The census serves primarily as a preliminary act for the military draft and for taxes (cf. I Kings 4:7–19, 27–28). The census thus serves to enhance royal, bureaucratic, oppressive power. In our own day the census is also for “market research,” which in the end is another form of the same monopolistic control. The census is a serious departure from old, informal modes of power and administration. In that earlier innocent world, a census is not needed, because (1) a draft is not necessary when the local militia can be depended upon in times of war and (2) taxes are not needed because the government is not so expansive. It is the breakdown of primary face-to-face relations that lead to such a formal organization of power.

In this narrative Joab is the voice of the old tradition (v. 3). Joab here echoes the sounds made by old grisly Samuel (I Sam. 8:11–19). Joab recognizes that the census is a serious shift of modes of power and is therefore a violation of God’s will, since the old social order is equated with God’s will. Joab is deferential to David, but he protests vigorously. When the protest is rejected by David, Joab characteristically acts to execute the king’s will.

The description of the census bespeaks not only high organization, it conjures swift runners, powerful horses, fearful royal agents invading old villages and settled relations (vv. 4–8). The census is the long, ruthless arm of the military state intruding into tribal and village life. This census is much like that of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1). It is not a benign act of counting but an act of bureaucratic terrorism. In the end, the narrative is explicit. The purpose is to count potential soldiers, “valiant men” (v. 9). The purpose is to mobilize military power. David had yielded to the seduction of state power (v. 1), albeit a seduction authored by God.

24:10–17. We are not told how, but David comes to recognize the dreadfulness of what he has done (v. 10). The power and attractiveness of David is that he still recognizes and cares. David is so unlike Solomon, for Solomon in his ideological obtuseness would not have acknowledged the affront against the very character of his own people. The David who speaks in verse 10 is not only the David who confesses in 12:13; he is also the David of sacramental imagination in 23:13–17. He still honors the memories and claims of his community and its tradition.

David confesses and repents. The repentance is not easy, however. The affront of the royal census must be paid for. Verses 11–14 are an odd interlude in the narrative, rather like David and Yahweh playing Russian roulette. David must be punished, but he may “pick his poison” from three options (vv. 12–13). These verses, like verse 1, fall outside the structure of the lawsuit of sin and punishment. In ordering the census, David is a standard royal type. In his response, however, he is not a standard royal type but a quintessential man of faith. David’s choice of punishment is rooted in his faith: “Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great” (v. 14). At his best, David fears God the most. He also trusts God the most. As in 15:25–26 and 16:11–12, David proposes to trust God. David does not imagine there is cheap grace, but he believes that in a punishment directly from God there may indeed be grace. In any case, there will be mercy only from God, certainly from no one else. In this very strange context, David articulates evangelical faith.

In verse 14, David eliminates only one of the three possible punishments, exposure to human foes. There is, however, no further debate about punishment. In verse 15, pestilence is given as punishment. (The third option, famine, is passed over in silence, neither eliminated nor commented upon.) The deathly pestilence is then followed by an exchange that is appropriate to the hiddenness of verse 1 and the dread uncertainty of verses 12–14. An “angel” is dispatched by God to execute the punishment. The angel is introduced as abruptly as is Yahweh’s anger in verse 1. The angel, necessary to the development of the plot, is introduced without comment.

In the midst of the execution of punishment, in the midst of the dramatic destruction of David’s kingdom, there is a staggering theological affirmation: “Yahweh repented” (v. 16). Yahweh suddenly stopped the destroying angel. Again, no reason is given for Yahweh’s abrupt change of heart. No more is explained of Yahweh’s repentance than of Yahweh’s

initial anger. Yahweh acts beyond the scope of Davidic understanding and, we have the impression, beyond the capacity of the narrative to understand.

Verse 16 articulates the graciousness of God in precise correspondence to David's faith in verse 14. David had trusted that "God's mercy is great." Now we see that Yahweh's mercy is indeed great. We have seen in I Samuel 15:11, 35 that the mind of God can change (about Saul). Now God's mind changes in the face of destruction (cf. Hosea 11:8–9). The narrative is analogous to the outcome of the story of Jonah. In that story God is to destroy the city Nineveh. God will not destroy, however, because God is "gracious ... and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil" (Jonah 4:2). What is at issue for Jonah and in this narrative is the very character of God, who in David's horizon is merciful. God is deeply faithful, even beyond God's own decree. David confesses his sin one more time (v. 17).

The punishment is stayed. It is stayed not because of David's confession but because Yahweh is merciful. We must not be distracted by the odd beginning of verse 1, by the strange options of verses 11–13, or by the angel sent and recalled in verse 16. The dramatic theological line is more direct:

"I have sinned greatly" (v. 10)

"I have done very foolishly" (v. 10)

"For his mercy is great" (v. 14)

Yahweh repented (v. 16)

"I have sinned" (v. 17)

The relationship of the last two items warrants particular comment. The narrative juxtaposition of verses 16 and 17 is stunning. Yahweh stays the hand of the angel and David prays at the exact same moment, so that the narrator presents the same event simultaneously from two different perspectives—one from Yahweh's view, the other from David's. To Yahweh, the reality of smiting brings repentance; to David the reality of smiting brings confession, also a mode of repentance. Thus both Yahweh and David "repent." Yahweh repents of anger (v. 1) and remembers mercy; David repents of foolish arrogance (vv. 10, 17) and remembers trusting, submitting faith. The simultaneous action of the two makes new interaction and new mutual fidelity possible.

The theological issue of this episode concerns the moral seriousness and sovereign graciousness of Yahweh. It also concerns the capacity of David to submit to Yahweh's sovereign graciousness and to live effectively in a world where moral seriousness and sovereign graciousness are at work. David's most telling act is his prayer (v. 17). In its wording, his prayer is a confession. In its intent, however, it is a petition that the people be spared. David, at the limit of royal power and privilege, finally must pray. He has no alternative. Yet David is ready to pray. He not only has no alternative; he has no resistance to prayer. As he stood in solidarity with his fellows (23:13–17), so now he stands in empty-handed, open-handed need before God.

This David is a wondrous narrative embodiment of serious faith. The great king is the one who speaks petition in need. At the same time, however, the narrative issues a protest against royal power that is arrogant, autonomous, and self-serving. The David of verse 2 (albeit incited) was a king who would number his soldiers, measure his power, and be prepared to control his life. That was a hard-nosed David, who did not heed Joab's stern word but who would work his unbridled will.

The David who prays in verse 17, however, is a voice very different from the regal David of verse 2. David has been broken, or healed, or returned to his senses (cf. Luke 15:17). David is indeed the "man after God's own heart" (I Sam. 13:14). David on occasion lapses and departs from this identity, but here he has come back to his true self.

David here is not so much like his ruthless son Solomon. He is much more like barren Hannah (I Sam. 1), who began our story. She is an empty-handed woman who can only petition. ("Nothing in my hand I bring.") Hannah brings nothing except her desperate faith. The David of II Samuel 24:17 forms a narrative counterpart to Hannah. He also comes empty-handed with nothing except his desperate faith. First Samuel 1 and II Samuel 24 form an envelope for our story. At the beginning and at the end, there is need, there is faith, there is petition, there is hearing, and there is a gift. At the end as at the beginning, real power is a gracious grant from Yahweh. The power Hannah and David have cannot be more than this. It also cannot be less than this. It must not be distorted to be other than this.

II Samuel 24:18–25

It remains for David to commit an act of visible, obedient piety. David follows the counsel of Gad (v. 18). He will build an altar in the very place where the angel's hand was stayed (v. 16). He is therefore dispatched to Araunah the Jebusite: that is, inhabitant of Jerusalem (v. 18). There follow a careful bargaining and negotiation for the property. The narrative of the exchange, polite and deferential, was most likely intended to be amusing. David wants to buy the threshing floor (v. 21). Araunah generously, playfully, wants to give everything, perhaps in fearful deference to the king-to-be in Jerusalem (vv. 22–23). David refuses the offer. David will not sacrifice what costs him nothing (v. 24; cf. I Chron. 29:14–17). The term “nothing” is *hinnam*. Could this word be a reference, albeit hidden, to Hannah, who had nothing and who lived gratefully? Unlike Hannah, David has economic means and so his obedience is more demanding. David must pay his way. Because he has more, more is required (Luke 12:48). David pays. He builds the altar. He worships (v. 25a).

Yahweh hears (v. 25b). Yahweh had heard Hannah (I Sam. 1:27). Yahweh heard David in 21:14. Yahweh hears, and the trouble is lifted. In the end it is Yahweh who guards and keeps Israel. The king cannot finally keep Israel. David is effective because he is obedient. This David, resistant to ideological pretension (cf. 18:3; 21:17), is a suppliant to whom God attends. As we look at David's kingship, the penultimate statement is that David is obedient. The decisive affirmation is that Yahweh is faithful. On this fidelity of God and on nothing else hang the life and future of Israel.

As the narrative of I Samuel begins, Israel is waiting for a king (I Sam. 2:10). It got its king. What Israel finally waited on, however, was the faithfulness of God. David's greatness is that in the midst of his seductions and ambiguities he attends to that faithfulness of God. The faithfulness of God is not in doubt in this narrative. What remains to be seen is whether Israel will have the courage and proper sense of identity to attend adequately to the faithfulness of God, to live toward that faithfulness, and to live from it. At the beginning Hannah did so. She worshiped (I Sam. 1:18). At the end David does the same. He worships (24:25).

The Samuel corpus is thus framed at beginning and end with powerful affirmations about God's fidelity and Israel's (Hannah's, David's) capacity to trust, submit, and pray. The decisive affirmation at beginning and end of the narrative concerns the overriding sovereignty of Yahweh. Between the beginning and the end, however, the narrative of Israel, of kingship, and

especially of David portrays a life and faith with much at risk. The power and attractiveness of this literature is found not only in its affirmation about God but in its honest, believable rendering of David, who is so utterly human. David is not afraid to trust God with all the seasons of his life, even painful ones. David knows that Yahweh knows him, that Yahweh is the one “from whom no secret can be hid.” David is unlike Saul, who must pretend in his fear and piety and ends with no reality of faith or of humanity. It is David’s uncompromising, unaccommodating humanity that makes it possible to trust in Yahweh.

The God who presides over the beginning and the end of the narrative with such power is present to and with David all the way through. Conversely, David in the presence of Yahweh is fully human with wounds, scars, and failures. David is neither sinless nor innocent. He can be and is forgiven, however, so that he has power for new life. David knows, as the narrative affirms to us, that the God of Israel overrides what is weak and vulnerable in David’s humanity and uses that weakness and vulnerability as an occasion for new life.

The narrative has to do with Yahweh, but Yahweh is deeply, resiliently, and endlessly committed to David. The power of Yahweh does not override or ignore the “warts” of Davidic history but uses what is candidly present in David for the sake of newness. David and Israel live before this God; their way is to hasten and to wait, to obey and to dare, to submit and to risk, and finally to yield and petition in confidence. Such a life culminates in glad, submitting worship, the same worship with which Hannah began the narrative.

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